

The National Archives: The Formative Years, 1934-1949

By Rodney A. Ross

The term "national archives" has three distinct meanings in this country. The term is commonly used to describe the permanently valuable documents created by the federal government from the First Continental Congress to the present day. It is also used to refer to the monumental and classical structure that occupies the plot of land between Seventh and Ninth Streets and Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues in Washington, D.C. Lastly the term is used to refer to a federal agency—the professional staff responsible for the preservation and use of the federal documentation stored in that impressive building, in fifteen records centers, and in presidential library units across the country. With three definitions it is not surprising that many people are a bit confused by the term "national archives."

It is the third use of the term—the professional staff—that is the subject of this essay.¹ The agency known as the National Archives was created

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¹For anyone wishing to do additional reading on the National Archives the best secondary works are H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation: Their Management, Preservation and Use* (1969) and Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968* (1978). For primary research on the National Archives the obvious place to begin is with the agency's organizational files maintained by the National Archives in Record Group 64, Records of the National Archives and Records Service. A preliminary inventory to this collection, prepared in 1971 by George S. Ulibarri, provides a framework for understanding the numerous administrative changes the agency has undergone. For a year-by-year summary of the National Archives' accomplishments during its years as an independent agency (1934-1949) the reader should consult the various editions of the *Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*.

on June 19, 1934 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the necessary enabling legislation. This year marks its golden anniversary of service to the Nation. The story of how the fledgling agency hired and trained a professional staff and coped with the problems of locating, arranging, and describing over 150 years of federal records is an important chapter in our past. From a fifty-year perspective it is clear that the first fifteen years, from 1934 to 1949, were the formative years of the National Archives as an agency.

Discussions as to the proper housing for our national archives began early in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, for the first century and a half of our nation's history each federal department, agency, and bureau maintained its own records, noncurrent as well as current. Finally in 1926 Congress authorized and appropriated funds for the construction of a national archives building to be located at a midpoint between the Capitol and the White House.² Ground-breaking took place in 1931. On February 20, 1933, President Herbert Hoover delivered the keynote address at the laying of the cornerstone for this "temple of our history."³

²For background on the battle by the historical profession in the United States for the establishment of a National Archives see Victor Gondos, Jr.'s *J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives, 1906-1926* (1981). This work is for the most part a reprint of Gondos's 1971 Ph.D. dissertation, with a foreword by James B. Rhoads, which Rhoads prepared for publication several years after Gondos's death.

³"Remarks of President Hoover at the Laying of the Cornerstone of the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C., Monday, February 20, 1933 at 2:30 o'clock," in Percy S. Flippin (comp.), "The Archives of the United States Government: A Documentary History, 1774-1934," (unpub. materials, National Archives library, 1938) vol. 22, p. 63. This collection of photostats and transcribed entries of legislative documents, newspaper clippings, and other sources was one of the main products of the Research Division during its brief existence.



• Robert Digges Wimberly Connor, head of the Department of History and Government at the University of North Carolina, was chosen by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to serve as the first Archivist of the United States.

As for the agency whose staff would direct the collection and subsequent processing of the federal government's archival records, no provision was made until 1934. Unlike Athena, who sprang fully-formed from the forehead of her father Zeus, the National Archives as an agency existed only on paper during much of 1934. Not until October 1934 did President Roosevelt select Robert Digges Wimberly Connor, the distinguished North Carolina educator, archivist, and historian, as the first Archivist of the United States. Connor undertook his duties at once, although the Senate did not confirm him in office until the following March.

By the end of 1934 the entire staff of the National Archives consisted of four persons: Connor; Marjory Terrell, Connor's long-time secretary from North Carolina; Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr., a nationally-known librarian and information specialist who was to have charge of archival programs; and Collas G. Harris, a bright, ambitious, politically savvy 28-year-old who was to handle administrative matters, including personnel, finance, and building maintenance, among others. Of course, given the fact that the National Archives building was still under construction, building maintenance was a concern for the future only. For nearly a year the ever-expanding skeleton staff occupied temporary office space across the street in the Justice Department building. Only in November 1935 did the staff, now numbering about 120, move into its permanent, though still uncompleted, home.

By that time at least one archival question had been resolved: whether the federal government would build a separate facility as a "hall of records" in which each federal agency would maintain a storage section for its own records. No less a person than President Roosevelt initially supported this concept, in part to make sure the National Archives was reserved for only the most important of documents. However, in the period between Roosevelt's signing of the National Archives Act and his appointing Connor as Archivist, opponents of a "hall of records" prevailed upon the president to approve the expenditure of Public Works Administration funds to fill in the large inner court architect John Russell Pope had designed for the National Archives with additional stack space. In this way the National Archives more than doubled the area allotted for records storage (from less than 374,000 to more than 757,000 square feet) and in the process doomed further proposals for a separate "hall of records."

Precisely what would go into the National Archives had not been decided at the time of the agency's establishment. All that the authorizing



Archives staff members examine a new accession of photographs.

legislation had done was to permit the Archivist (or his deputy) to inspect personally the archives "of any agency of the United States Government whatsoever and wheresoever located."⁴ It would then be up to a National Archives Council, composed of the chairmen of the appropriate Senate and House committees and the heads of the cabinet departments, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution, plus the Archivist, to define the classes of materials to be transferred to the National Archives and to make regulations governing the transfer of records. In addition, the act authorized the Archivist to accept from private sources the donation of "motion-picture films and sound recordings pertaining to and illustrative of the history of the United States."⁵

⁴48 Stat. 1122-1124, reprinted in *First Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States* (1936), pp. 43-45.

⁵*Ibid.*

As for how the new agency should be set up, the National Archives Act said virtually nothing, other than to provide that the Archivist and his top assistants (i.e., those making at least \$5,000) were to be appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The law gave the Archivist a free hand in all other personnel matters and explicitly provided for selection of employees without regard to civil service law.

Connor adopted, with some modification, a staffing plan drawn up by Dorsey Hyde which mirrored the functional arrangement at the Library of Congress.⁶ Under the Hyde plan the Archivist was to have four key assistants: director of archival service (Hyde), executive officer (Harris), director of publications and administrative secretary. The director of publications was responsible for all publications by the National Archives, such as guides, calendars, and pamphlets, and was to act as secretary of the National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC), an organization which, though created by the same 1934 act that established the National Archives, was largely moribund for the first two decades of its existence. The administrative secretary had public relations in general and those with Congress in particular as his sphere of endeavor, plus the secretaryship for the National Archives Council.

According to the Hyde plan most of the actual

⁶Cf. Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr., "Our National Archives—A New Field of Professional Effort," *Special Libraries* 26 (Nov. 1935):2-6.



The records of the U.S. Food Administration arrived at the Archives in December 1935.

archival work at the National Archives was to be carried out by professional divisions: Accessions (surveying and appraising likely material for inclusion in the National Archives); Repair and Preservation; Classification (determining a numbering system for records brought into the National Archives); Cataloging (developing a general catalog of the Archives' holdings); Reference; Research (including the creation of cross-sectional and interdisciplinary guides to the Archives' collections); Maps and Charts; Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings; and the Library (setting up and maintaining a reference library for the staff and researchers at the National Archives). Almost as an afterthought Hyde indicated that records transferred to the National Archives were to be maintained by multiple custodial divisions that would reflect the organizational make-up of the federal government. For instance, the State Department Archives would maintain the records of the Department of State.

In retrospect Hyde's plan was a starting point, the evolution of which saw the custodial divisions gain the functions initially assigned to the Accessions, Reference, Research, Classification, and Cataloging divisions. The story of the sorting out of duties and tasks forms one of the central themes for the years Connor served as Archivist, 1934-1941. But before that shake-down could happen, there had first to be a staff to carry out the Archives' mission.

In 1935 Connor completed the naming of his top administrative assistants. For director of publications he chose Solon Justus Buck, a former head of the Minnesota state archives whose academic credentials and standing within the American Historical Association equaled that of Connor himself. For administrative secretary he selected Thad Page, a Capitol Hill Senatorial staff assistant whose father had once served with Connor's father in the North Carolina state legislature.

The search for suitable people to head the professional divisions gathered together a staff with impressive credentials. The group included research historians Thomas M. Owens, Jr., Roscoe R. Hill, Nelson Vance Russell, Percy S. Flippin, Philip M. Hamer, and Vernon D. Tate; paper chemist Arthur E. Kimberly; geographer W. L. G. Joerg; librarian John R. Russell; and Hill staffer John G. Bradley. Owens was head of Accessions; Hill was responsible for Classification; Nelson Vance Russell was in charge of Reference; Flippin directed Research; Hamer was responsible for the Library; and Tate was in charge of Photographic Reproduction. The non-historians took charge of appropriate divisions. Kimberly headed Repair and Preservation; John



Records arrived at the National Archives in various states of disrepair and in all types of containers.

Russell directed Cataloging; Joerg was responsible for Maps and Charts; and Bradley handled Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings. In addition, Connor chose government attorney Bernard R. Kennedy to head the Federal Register, a division established within the National Archives following congressional passage of the Federal Register Act of 1935, which gave to the Archives the responsibility for the publication of the federal government's rules, regulations, and orders.

One of Collas Harris's first duties as executive officer for the fledgling National Archives was to develop position descriptions, along with salary levels, for jobs to be performed. For professional archival positions he turned to the Library of Congress' pay scale as a guide. For stenographers, clerk typists, file clerks, accountants, and the like he adopted established Civil Service standards for similar positions at other agencies. By the middle of 1935 the National Archives had collected 15,000 completed applications from prospective employees. As completed applications were received, Harris's staff in the personnel office classified them according to qualifications listed and sent the division chiefs the papers of suitable applicants for positions to be filled.

Since the National Archives Act had placed the National Archives outside the scope of the Civil Service Commission—a situation which remained in effect until November 1938—the Archives had a free hand in selecting candidates for jobs. Contrary to the fears of some and the hopes of others, the Archives never became a dumping ground for political spoilsmen. However, the Archives did go through the motions of requiring Democratic congressional endorsements from applicants prior to selection. It appears that these endorsements were a significant factor in the hiring of clerical and support staff. Whether these endorsements were ever anything more than a pro forma gesture for the archival staff per se is open to debate.⁷

For prospective professional employees a more

⁷In the 1970s, Philip C. Brooks, Sr., conducted a series of oral history interviews with persons employed or associated with the National Archives. In these interviews Brooks questioned his subjects about the relative importance of political endorsements in the hiring of professional employees. None of Brooks' subjects contested the point that political endorsements were of limited importance. Dorothy Hill Gersack, an employee not interviewed by Brooks, took a contrary view in a 1982 interview with NARS staff member Kathryn Murphy. Murphy seconded Gersack's position in a recent conversation with the author.



In this June 1936 photograph, employees of the Repair and Preservation Division wheel a cart of Veterans Administration files into a vacuum chamber for fumigation.

important factor was active support from their mentors in the historical profession, not the least of whom was the eminent American historian J. Franklin Jameson. In time staff members already on board were instrumental in bringing to the Archives their friends, fellow alumni, and former colleagues in the teaching profession, with alumni from the universities of Minnesota and Pennsylvania particularly well-represented. Once the National Archives began the process of taking into its facilities established archival collections which had been assembled and organized by the State Department, the Veterans Administration and others, many of the agency employees who previously had serviced these collections joined the Archives staff.

By the Fall of 1937 the staff had grown to 265 employees—250 in the National Archives proper, plus another 15 persons in the division of the Federal Register. Of the total 265 employees, 89 were in the professional series, 115 were in the administrative/clerical series, and 61 were in two support series. Fourteen persons, approximately 16 percent of the employees in the professional series, were women, with all but one of them in either cataloging or reference. Although blacks served as truck drivers and laborers, not until after Pearl Harbor did the National Ar-

chives hire its first black professional.

The most prestigious archival positions, excluding administrators and division heads, were those of deputy examiners in the Accessions Division, the men who went out to the agencies as deputies of the Archivist of the United States to survey, appraise, and arrange for the transfer to the National Archives of the accumulation of pertinent federal records in the Washington area. At the peak of this activity there were ten deputy examiners. From their ranks came many of the principals who led the National Archives through the end of the 1960s, such men as Robert Bahmer, Wayne Grover, Philip Hamer, Oliver Holmes, Dallas Irvine, Herman Kahn, Arthur Leavitt, Paul Lewinson, Theodore Schellenberg, and Fred Shipman.

An associated prestigious position was that of special examiner. These examiners were attached to Hyde's personal staff until the late 1930s when they too were made a part of the Accessions Division. It was their responsibility to cull through the lists of "useless" papers to be destroyed that agencies sent the Archivist annually. According to the National Archives Act, the Archivist was to recommend to Congress the disposal of government papers having no permanent value or historical interest. Their

work, especially that of Emmett Leahy and Philip C. Brooks, Sr., led to the development of disposition schedules specifying which kinds of routine documents could be destroyed without asking permission each year. The special examiners, like the deputy examiners, generally held advanced degrees in American history.

Although the staff of the National Archives moved into the Archives building in November 1935, the first stack areas were not completed until the following May, by which time the deputy examiners had made an impressive start in surveying agency records in the capital for possible acquisition. Their task was far more complicated than simply obtaining a list of holdings from the appropriate records manager of each agency. First the Archivist had had to make initial contact to secure permission for Archives personnel to see the materials in question—no mean feat, since many of the departments and agencies objected in principle to transfer of their out-of-date records to the National Archives. Once permission was obtained, the deputy examiners had to locate the records in storage facilities as varied as the imagination could conjure—basements, attics, carriage houses, abandoned buildings, alcoves, stairwells, and the like—in the District of Columbia and its suburbs.

For their work the deputy examiners used detailed forms with space for all manner of questions about the records (e.g., quantity, arrangement, date span, and research value). Despite the fact that most of the deputy examiners held academic degrees, they found that their superiors at the Archives, especially Dorsey Hyde, did not support their attempts to establish precedents or to spend time discussing mutual problems. They were expected to devote their energies to opening each and every file-cabinet drawer to determine the quantities of records involved.⁸

The survey by the deputy examiners extended over a five-year period, though the bulk of the work was done during fiscal year 1936. In their survey they discovered the existence in over 6,500 depositories or rooms nearly 3,000,000 cubic feet of records, substantial portions of which were exposed to the hazards of fire, dirt, vermin, the elements, and/or theft. In his annual report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1937, the Archivist reported that the deputy examiners had concluded that 45.3 percent of the records surveyed ought to be transferred to the National Archives.

⁸Fred W. Shipman, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., March 27, 1973, transcript, Record Group 64, National Archives (hereafter RG 64, NA); Paul Lewinson, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., May 18, 1973, transcript, RG 64, NA.

The volume involved was staggering, a quantum leap beyond anything which had been anticipated. In 1930 the advisory committee appointed by President Hoover to determine the size and character of the National Archives estimated that less than 50 percent of the building's capacity would be occupied 50 years after its opening.⁹ Yet even with the 1934 decision to double the building's capacity, only 2,033,712 cubic feet of document area was available. In other words, the transfer of all records in Washington then in storage deemed worthy of acquisition would fill two-thirds of the building immediately. And this figure included neither the current records of the myriad New Deal agencies nor those about to be generated during World War II.

A complementary Survey of Federal Archives, undertaken at the request of the National Archives by the Works Progress Administration in 1936 and 1937, revealed another 4,000,000 cubic feet of federal records in existence throughout the United States, much of it in post offices and customs houses. Fortunately for the National Archives most of these records from outside the

⁹"Report of the Advisory Committee on the National Archives Building, 1930," reprinted in *First Annual Report*, pp. 51-58.



An Archives staff member shows off the cellulose acetate used for the lamination of documents.



*R.D.W. Connor receives a master print of the epic film *Gone With The Wind*.*

Washington area were of much less value than those in the capital.

There was, of course, a difference between knowing that there were records which ought to be transferred to the National Archives and effecting the transfer. A necessary step toward transferring records occurred in February 1936 when the National Archives Council in its second meeting ratified a set of resolutions proposed by the Archivist defining classes of materials suitable for transfer to the Archives.

By the end of June 1936 the Archives had accessioned its first 58,800 cubic feet of records, most of them from the Veterans Administration (VA) and the then-defunct World War I era U.S. Food Administration. The Archives took pride in the fact that the Division of the Federal Register had received from the State Department original files of presidential proclamations from 1791 to date, as well as executive orders, 1862 to date. The approaches of the National Archives to the records from the Food Administration, the VA and the State Department illustrate many of the problems and concerns of the National Archives in its early phase of records acquisition.

What the Archives had defined as its top priorities for records acquisition and what it first brought into the new building were two different things. The Food Administration records, for instance, were not intrinsically of great value, especially since the most important of the papers relating to the agency had already been accessioned by the Hoover Institution in California. Yet the Archives not only took in those Food Administration records in storage in the Washington area (most of which concerned local ac-



*Hattie McDaniel and Clark Gable in *Gone With The Wind*. Courtesy: Museum of Modern Art.*

tivities for each of the state Food Administration subunits), but the Classification Division devoted inordinate amounts of time to developing classification schemes for these records. In later years the National Archives disposed of (i.e., threw out) a substantial portion of the Food Administration records it had accepted in the 1930s.¹⁰

The VA records were another matter: these were clearly materials of great value, for they consisted of the pension records of soldiers, sailors, and marines who had fought America's wars prior to World War I. The question was whether processing and providing reference service on them would be beyond the capacity of the National Archives. At length Connor decided that it behooved the National Archives to accept the VA's offer of records in order to prevent federal agencies from prevailing upon Congress to grant funds for additional agency-operated records storage areas.¹¹

In retrospect, the acquisition of the VA papers put a tremendous strain on the relatively scarce resources of the new National Archives. The flattening of all the folded pension records in itself set a milestone yet to be surpassed as the most extensive preservation effort ever accomplished by the National Archives.¹² Once the Archives staff had brought the VA records into the building's stack areas, the chore of answering inquiries from the VA began. So great was the

¹⁰Herman Kahn, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., May 20, 1973, transcript, RG 64, NA.

¹¹Fred W. Shipman transcript.

¹²Sherrod E. East, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., June 15, 1977, transcript, RG 64, NA.

number of requests—as many as 25,000 in a single month—that the National Archives had to bypass the Reference Division, which had been set up to deal with requests for information on the records in the Archives, and instead let the custodial division holding the VA files work directly with the VA.¹³ Actually, the physical work of pulling case files was done by former VA clerks whom the Archives had hired in order to retain personnel skilled in the organizational arrangement of existing VA records. Soon a truck was making daily runs between the VA and the National Archives building taking case files to the VA and bringing others back to the Archives for refiling.

Of all records held by the various departments, one of the key groups which the Archives coveted was that assembled by the Department of State. The break for the Archives occurred when a staff member in the administrative office noticed that the State Department in its budget to Congress was asking for \$5,000 for preservation funds for its pre-1906 records.¹⁴ Through a complex series of negotiations Connor was able to persuade the State Department that the Archives was a fit repository for the collections of diplomatic and consular correspondence which were the pride of the Department's Historical Office.¹⁵ When in late 1937 or early 1938 Connor learned of the State Department's decision to surrender its pre-1906 files, he quietly remarked to an aide: "The National Archives has come of age."¹⁶

Lack of storage space was the basic reason agencies were willing to part with their records. For some agencies, such as the General Land Office of the Interior Department, this need was greater than for others. For instance, neither the House of Representatives nor the Supreme Court sent any records to the National Archives until after World War II. During the four-year span from fiscal year 1938 through fiscal year 1941 the Archives averaged 54,000 cubic feet of accessions per year. With the coming of World War II in fiscal year 1942, this figure nearly tripled.

Once the inflow began, the procedures at the

¹³Fred W. Shipman transcript.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵R. D. W. Connor's journals, begun in the final years of his term as Archivist, contain essays on his various activities. His account in volume 6 on the 1937–1938 negotiations leading to the transfer to the National Archives of the State Department's archival collection is one of the more interesting entries.

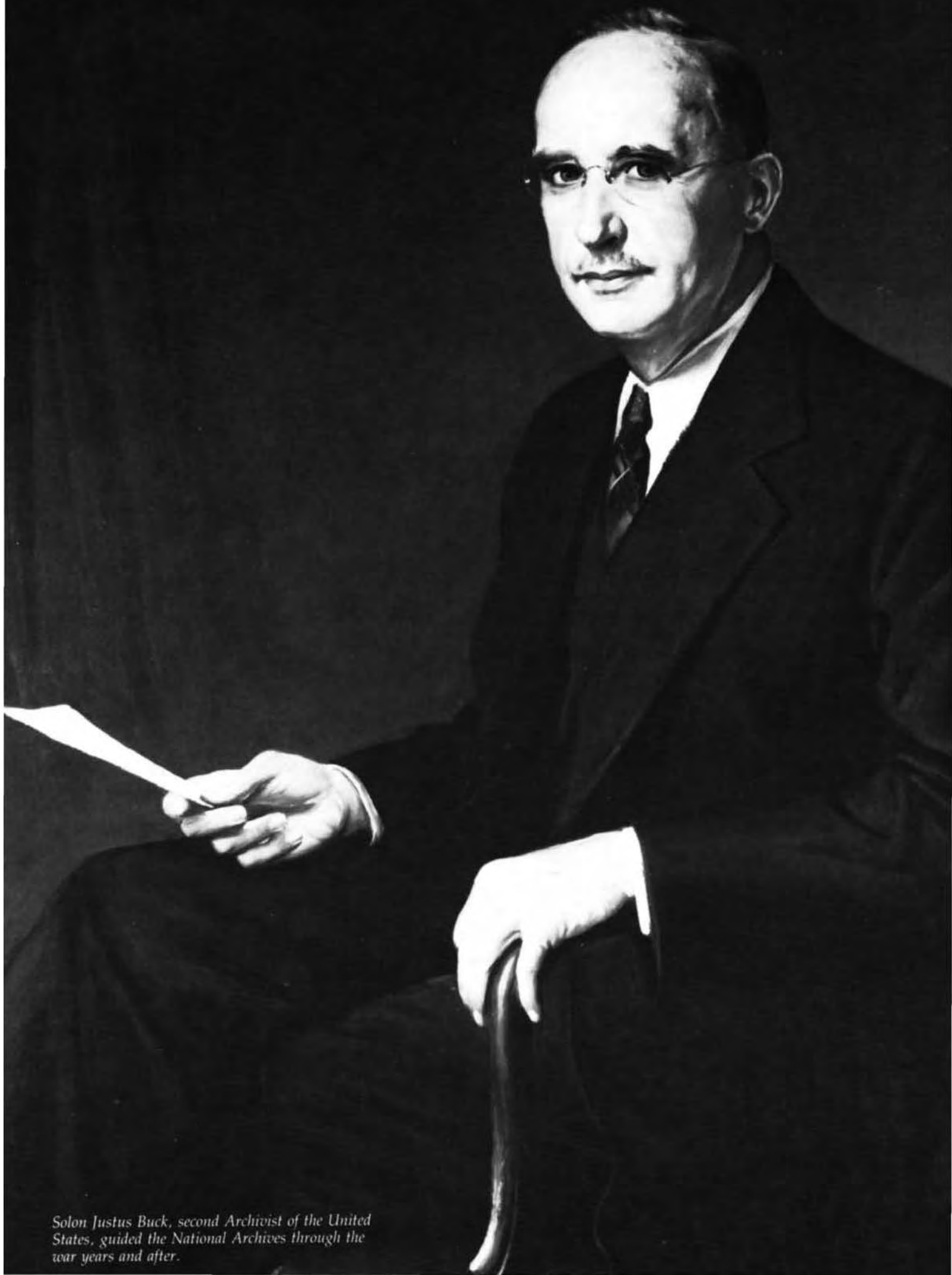
¹⁶R. D. W. Connor to Fred W. Shipman as recalled by Karl L. Trevor in an interview conducted by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., transcript, RG 64, NA. Trevor rewrote and revised his interview transcript in October 1974.



Archivists developed procedures for the preservation and



description of the newly accessioned archival materials in the late 1930s.



Solon Justus Buck, second Archivist of the United States, guided the National Archives through the war years and after.

National Archives followed a consistent pattern. The deputy examiners determined which records were to be acquired and arranged for them to be transported by truck to the National Archives. When the records arrived they were taken to the Repair and Preservation Division to be cleaned by air blasts and fumigated in giant tanks using a mixture of ethylene oxide and carbon dioxide to kill any insects or fungi present. The staff then performed needed preservation tasks, including the flattening of folded documents.

From the Repair and Preservation Division the staff carted the records to the windowless, air-conditioned stack area reserved for that particular agency's records, where archivists with the appropriate custodial division assumed control and, taking care to preserve the original order of the records wherever possible, placed them horizontally into ubiquitous closed steel drawers. Only during World War II when these steel drawers were unobtainable did the National Archives revise its techniques for the physical filing of records so that henceforth (and continuing to this day) records would be filed vertically in easily movable cardboard archival storage containers.

Although the Archives changed its procedures regarding the physical filing of records, it maintained a general philosophical consistency with respect to how agency records ought to be arranged in National Archives stack areas.¹⁷ The key was observance of the twin archival guidelines accepted by European archivists: *respect des fonds* (i.e., not interfiling the records of different governmental units) and original order (i.e., keeping the records in the same organizational filing scheme as had been practiced by the agency of origin).

One subject of ongoing discussion in the early years of the National Archives was how greatly the institution ought to be influenced by European archival theories. Until 1939 the Archives made no attempt to provide systematic formal training for its staff.¹⁸ Indeed, at the time the National Archives was established the only published English-language how-to-do-it guide in the archival field was *A Manual of Archive Administration* by the British archivist Hilary Jen-

kinson.¹⁹ As one of the early employees at the Archives was later to remark, "Dorsey Hyde instructed us all to read Hilary Jenkinson, and it seemed to me that all Dorsey Hyde knew about Archives and all that Collas Harris knew about Archives came from their reading of Hilary Jenkinson."²⁰

That may have been true at the very beginning, but in a short time the picture changed. Solon Buck, for one, concentrated on reading everything possible on archives. In this pursuit the Archives' library was a special help to him. The head librarian, Philip Hamer, had worked out a system of obtaining translations of articles on archives published in a dozen or more European languages. Another archives staff member, Arthur Leavitt, provided a notable service to the American archival profession by translating into English the pre-eminent work on archives, the 1898 *Handleiding*, or "Handbook," by the Dutch archivists Samuel Müller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin.

The late 1930s witnessed a number of important developments regarding American archival education. The most prominent of these was associated with the transformation of the American Historical Association's annual Conference of Archivists in 1936 into the Society of American Archivists (SAA), a metamorphosis directed by Solon Buck.²¹ For the first decade or two of the SAA's existence the National Archives exerted a dominant influence on its policies and leadership, although nominally the only National Archives persons in top positions were Solon Buck as one of the SAA's five council members and Philip C. Brooks, Sr., whom the Archives "front office" selected for the post of SAA secretary. One of the most useful by-products of the SAA's establishment was the decision to create a quarterly professional journal, the *American Archivist*, which began publication in 1938. Its pages provided a nation-wide forum for the sharing of knowledge on a variety of archival concerns.

At approximately the same time the National Archives started publication of its own series of in-house *Staff Information Circulars*, including such issues as Arthur Kimberly's *Repair and Preser-*

¹⁷For a discussion of archival theories and practices, with special note of the role played by the National Archives, see Richard C. Berner's *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (1983).

¹⁸Cf. Collas G. Harris, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., January 13, 1972, transcript, RG 64, NA; Herbert E. Angel, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., January 24, 1973, transcript, RG 64, NA.

¹⁹For Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr.'s review of the 1937 revision of Jenkinson's 1922 work, see the December 1937 issue of the *Library Journal*.

²⁰Herman Kahn transcript.

²¹Buck's role can be traced through materials in the folder "Conference of Archivists" in the Buck papers at the Library of Congress. For a history of the Society of American Archivists see J. Frank Cook's "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983):374-399.

vation in the National Archives and Theodore Schellenberg's *European Archival Practices in Arranging Records*. In an informal approach to education, Buck would take a group of promising young archivists to lunch on Saturdays during which they would discuss archival problems.²²

By 1940 training at the Archives began in earnest, with in-service classes exclusively for Archives personnel, the first being Buck's seminar "Federal Administrative History" and Hamer's course "National Archives Correspondence and Report Writing." Subsequently various divisions held their own weekly seminars. In yet another venture Buck, with the assistance of the respected German refugee archivist Ernst Posner, inaugurated a two-semester course under the auspices of the American University on "The History and Administration of Archives." This course, in which an overwhelming majority of students were Archives employees, became the first college course in the United States providing archival training.

In another manifestation of the Archives' growing maturity, Connor effected a modification in the organizational structure. In recognition of the fact that there was simply too much work to be done to bother with the Research Division, this unit was abolished. With its increased holdings the Archives established more and more custodial divisions to handle agency records. Often the Archives placed in charge of these divisions the deputy examiner who had surveyed the agency's records, resulting in the dismantling of the Accessions Division as its functions were taken over by the custodial units. By the end of 1939 the National Archives had established the following department divisions: Legislative Archives, State Department Archives, Treasury Department Archives, War Department Archives, Justice Department Archives, Post Office Department Archives, Navy Department Archives, Interior Department Archives, Agriculture Department Archives, Commerce Department Archives, Labor Department Archives, Independent Agencies Archives, and Veterans Administration Archives.

Problems continued between the custodial divisions and the Reference, Cataloging, and Classification Divisions. With Reference, a basically untenable situation was exacerbated by the uncompromising attitude of the division head, Nelson Vance Russell, that his unit had paramount jurisdiction on matters of use, access, and service for the Archives' holdings.²³ Russell chose to resign when the Archivist authorized the cus-



By 1938 the Archives had accepted 370,000 running feet of motion picture film.

tomial units to take reference inquiries directly from the agencies whose records they held. When Philip Hamer was selected to replace Russell, the library was eliminated as a separate division and its operations were subsumed within those of the Reference Division. In time Reference surrendered to the custodial units most of the specific reference responsibilities it formerly had exercised and instead concentrated on providing basic information services for researchers.

During the final year or two of the Connor administration at the National Archives the institution resolved difficulties which had surfaced regarding the Cataloging and Classification divisions. In the process the Archives in effect admitted that its earlier goal of becoming an information center simply was not realistic given the techniques and equipment at hand. The solution provided a workable approach for the National Archives to develop tools by which users could gain access to records in the National Archives.

In 1940 the Archives set up a special committee on finding aids, chaired by Marcus Price, Dorsey Hyde's assistant, but in which Solon Buck would be the driving force, to study the problem and come up with a solution. The following year the committee proposed that the basic unit for an arrangement and description of records should

²²Fred W. Shipman transcript.

²³Ibid.

be the record group—"a body of organizationally and functionally related records established with particular regard for the administrative history, complexity and volume of the records and archives of an agency."²⁴ Subsequently all records in the National Archives were assigned to one of these record groups. Originally, 190 record groups were established, but by 1984 this number had risen to nearly 500.

Specifically, the finding aids committee recommended that the Archives institute single-page registration sheets as the basic index to its holdings. The committee recommended that preliminary checklists and inventories be prepared for each record group to provide more descriptive guides. These suggestions were ac-

cepted by Connor, who in a February 1941 memorandum directed the personnel of the various custodial units to create the required finding aids.²⁵

The finding aids committee's report said nothing about the status of the divisions of Cataloging and Classification. In a separate confidential report to the Archivist, however, Price and Buck recommended the dissolution of the two divisions. This was done in March 1941.

During his tenure as Archivist, Connor did a creditable job in overseeing developments. True, the Archives went through a period of adjustment to reality in which it shifted both priorities and basic organizational format. Yet there had simply been no way for it to begin operations with a correct focus, for there were no existing

²⁴This definition is that used in the most recently published guide to the holdings of the National Archives: National Archives and Records Service—General Services Administration, *Guide to the National Archives of the United States* (1974), p. 6.

²⁵"Directions for the preparation of finding mediums, issued by the Archivist, February 28, 1941," reprinted in *Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States* (1942), pp. 65–68.



This is the central search room of the Archives as it appeared in April 1938.

models upon which it could have patterned itself satisfactorily.

One area in which Connor, or in this case an archivist on Connor's staff, paved the way for the future in bold steps was in the field of microphotography. Here credit belongs to Vernon Tate, the long-time head of the Archives' photographic division. From pioneer projects in the mid-1930s, such as the microfilming of 2.6 million pension catalog cards which the Veterans Administration insisted upon keeping but which the Archives needed for the records it had accessioned, Tate turned his attention to servicing reference requests for reproductions of the Archives' holdings. Rather than photograph the same material again and again, Tate worked out a plan whereby the Archives established a set of film negatives for its most requested materials. Although this practice began as a reference project, the Archives was quick to point out other possible advantages relating to preservation, publications, and space considerations. After World War II Tate's early efforts became the basis for one of the Archives' main programs in making its records widely available for research.

The establishment of the Roosevelt Presidential Library, which came under the National Archives' control in 1940, was another of Connor's most noteworthy accomplishments.²⁶ Connor worked with President Roosevelt to set up a privately-built, federally-operated institution combining a museum and an archival repository, with the latter featuring Roosevelt's presidential and personal papers, plus those of his associates. The success of the Roosevelt Library paved the way for the enactment of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955. This measure served as the basis for the establishment and operation of all other presidential libraries and presidential materials projects currently run by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS).

When Connor decided to resign in the summer of 1941, he could look back with pride concerning his accomplishments and those of his staff. By this time the staff had grown to 438, of whom 14 were on leave with the armed forces and 12 were employed by the Roosevelt Library.

²⁶Connor devoted most of volumes two and three of his six volume journal to discussions relating to the creation of the Roosevelt library. Connor's journal is with his papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. Cf. R. D. W. Connor, "The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," *American Archivist* 3 (Apr. 1940); Waldo Gifford Leland, "The Creation of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library: A Personal Narrative," *American Archivist* 18 (Jan. 1955); and Donald R. McCoy, "The Beginnings of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 7 (Fall 1975).

The National Archives had established itself firmly upon the Washington scene. Connor's final gift to the National Archives was in seeing his chosen successor, Solon Buck, become second Archivist of the United States.

Buck was superbly qualified for this position on all but one count: he lacked Connor's feel for dealing with people. He could nitpick subordinates; he was capable of lecturing congressmen. In other respects his appointment was the best possible one Roosevelt could have made. Buck had solid professional standing with both the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association. He had first-hand knowledge of state archival matters and of operations at the National Archives. In 1938 he had gone to Europe where he toured the continent's leading archives. Back in this country he had established himself as the foremost archival instructor in the nation.

Connor and Buck proved to be a study in contrasts. While Connor had been a fairly remote figure to most of his employees, Buck as Archivist seemed to be actively involved with everyone and everything. Under Buck the National Archives devoted increased attention to records administration. This field, plus nearly everything else which happened during Buck's tenure as Archivist (1941-1948), was profoundly influenced by World War II.

Records administration ultimately involved the drawing up of disposal schedules for federal agencies that stipulated which series of records were to be retained permanently and which were to be maintained for various time periods prior to destruction. The recognition of the need for records administration, or records management as it was later called, became clear as the prospect of American participation in World War II appeared more and more imminent. Indeed, the leadership of the Society of American Archivists stressed that one of the most important war-related tasks for the profession would be to control the tremendous output of records which was sure to be generated.

The leading authorities in the new field were Emmett Leahy and Philip C. Brooks, Sr., Archives employees who had begun their respective careers at the National Archives as special examiners. The two men helped to formulate proposals which influenced federal records management practices for years to come. In the meantime the National Archives both secured legislation giving it increased disposal authority and organized a roundtable conference, the Interagency Records Administration Conference (IRAC)—later known as the Information and Records Administration Conference—where



Wayne C. Grover, third Archivist of the United States, directed the agency as it became a service within the newly established General Services Administration.

representatives from numerous federal agencies met together to discuss common problems.

During World War II personnel from the National Archives did more than simply talk about records administration. Archives personnel moved into administrative posts in both the Navy and the Army and put the advanced theories of the day to work. After accepting a commission with the Navy, Emmett Leahy helped establish a series of naval records centers—low-cost storage facilities to which seldom used but still active records could be sent to free space for other purposes. Leahy's accomplishments were duplicated by Army records officials, including former National Archives deputy examiners Wayne Grover and Robert Bahmer, both of whom were to serve in turn as Archivists of the United States. Beginning in the early 1950s the National Archives itself would set up and administer a dozen regional federal records centers located across the continent from Massachusetts to California and from Illinois to Texas.

That, of course, was in the future. What concerned employees of the National Archives during the war was the very survival of the institution, its staff, and its programs. As the threat of war approached attention was given to safeguarding personnel and records in case of aerial bombardment.²⁷

The Archives experienced drastic cuts in staff as personnel left the Archives for induction into the armed services and for reimbursable work with other agencies. These staff changes, coupled with budgetary reductions, saw the staff drop in size from 502 at the end of fiscal year 1942 to 337 at the end of fiscal year 1945 (excluding persons on leave without pay due to military service, but including seven persons with the Roosevelt Library). This was only part of the picture, for the Archives suffered annual personnel turnover rates reaching nearly 60 percent in fiscal year 1943 and thereafter decreasing to 41 percent and 30 percent for fiscal years 1944 and 1945, respectively.

Since during the war authorization for staff levels was based on how valuable the agency was to the war effort, the Archives did its best to prove its usefulness. The National Archives did in fact make significant contributions to the war effort in many ways. The Archives gave priority to processing the records of World War I agencies so that their World War II successors might learn how similar problems had been resolved. (The standing joke at the Archives was that the purpose of this work was so that the



Major General Anthony C. McAuliffe, hero of the Battle of the Bulge, unveils an exhibit of German surrender documents. At left is Solon Buck.

contemporary agencies could make the same mistakes over again.)²⁸ Archivists answered reference questions from federal agencies ranging from inquiries for copyright precedents regarding war-related work done by private industry to requests for blueprints of shipyards which could serve as construction guides for urgently needed new ones.²⁹ The Navy in its all-out recruiting campaign to build up a "2-ocean navy" drew upon Archives records of seamen in the merchant marine. Private individuals obtained supporting evidence from passenger lists of incoming ships, naturalization records, census surveys, and the like to establish American citizenship as required for employment in defense industries.

On more purely military matters the Army, the Navy, and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) found a gold mine of information in the Archives' cartographic and still-photos collections. One simply could never tell where items of use to the military would surface. One archivist, for instance, found that the records of an 1870 fishing expedition to Alaska included photographs, with coordinates, of Attu and Kiska, the Aleutian Islands off Alaska occupied by Japan.³⁰ Another archivist uncovered a map detailing passages through the Alps. So valuable

²⁸Philip C. Brooks, Sr., unpublished memoir, November 16, 1976, transcript, RG 64, NA.

²⁹Cf. Guy A. Lee, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., March 14, 1973, transcript, RG 64, NA; Solon J. Buck, "The National Archives—Reservoir of Information and Experience," (unpub. manuscript, Apr. 2, 1945, National Archives library).

³⁰Vernon D. Tate, interview by Philip C. Brooks, Sr., June 8, 1973, transcript, RG 64, NA.

²⁷Sherron E. East transcript.

were the Archives' holdings that the OSS set up its own photographic production unit within the National Archives building.

As a further contribution to the war effort, the Archives utilized the services of Ernst Posner in drawing up annotated lists of archival repositories in Axis-held territories. Posner also alerted the federal government to the importance captured archives would play for American occupation forces.

Ironically, Posner's close relationship with the National Archives resulted in the most pernicious attack by a congressional committee the Archives has ever experienced. During 1944 budget hearings Senator Kenneth McKellar demanded to know why the Archives had given desk space to a German alien. It made no difference that Posner, a Christian of Jewish heritage, had been seized by the Nazis and incarcerated at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp following the Crystal Night pogrom. It made no difference that Posner was on the verge of becoming a naturalized American citizen. To McKellar, Posner was behind such supposed nefarious plots as the shift from steel to cardboard records containers in order to make America's archives more susceptible to destruction by Nazi bombers. Buck courageously came to Posner's defense. The defense, however, did nothing to temper McKellar's open hostility against Posner and by association against both Buck and the National Archives.

Within the Archives the administrative stability of the Connor years gave way to one reorganization after another. Collas Harris and Dorsey Hyde, who along with Buck had been three of Connor's top four lieutenants, left the Archives in 1943. Dan Lacy, one of Connor's former students from North Carolina, became

the new number two person at the Archives. In reopening the old question of centralized versus decentralized control of functions, Buck appointed directors of "Records Accessioning and Preservation" and of "Research and Records Description." Disputes based on personalities flared anew.

Many resented the attitudes and priorities of Lacy and two of his top assistants. By 1947 these resentments had reached the point that Archives dissidents were able to prevail upon Congress to attach a rider to an appropriations bill forbidding the expenditure of money for salaries of Archives officials who had come in under wartime appointments. Ultimately only four persons were affected, one of whom was Dan Lacy. To a number of observers Buck's decision to resign in 1948 was a foregone conclusion following the congressional budget action of the previous year.

By the time of Buck's departure the National Archives had achieved a solid foundation for many of its future activities. Certainly, questions such as agency restrictions on records use remained to be resolved fully, as did such subjects as horizontal versus vertical organization of archival functions. And the Archives' 1949 loss of independence and incorporation into the General Services Administration would open up several new areas of development, with both positive and negative consequences.³¹ But for the period through 1949 or so, in the words of one former deputy examiner, "what the National Archives accomplished [was] really staggering."³² □

³¹For background on how and why the National Archives lost its independence, see H. G. Jones' *The Records of a Nation*.

³²Paul Lewinson transcript.