

ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY: A PROPOSAL FOR A RE-EVALUATION OF ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARCHIVAL PROFESSION

ARTHUR D. LARSON

Archivists are generally in agreement that a basic knowledge of administrative history, applied through the central principles of *provenance* and *respect de fonds*, is essential to the organization and arrangement of archives. The importance of administrative history for this purpose was recognized by the pioneers of modern archives administration in both the United States and Europe. In his well-known paper, "The National Archives: A Programme," and in other of his writings, Waldo Gifford Leland emphasized the importance of a knowledge of administrative history to what he called the "classification" of records.¹ The same point was made in greater detail in the archival manual by the Dutch archivists Muller, Feith, and Fruin; in the manual by the English archivist Hilary Jenkinson; in the writings of the dean of American state archivists, Margaret C. Norton; and by many other archivists.²

Broader conceptions of the role of administrative history have been implied, for example, by H.G. Jones, who asserted that the archivists, in addition to a "general knowledge of history and government," must acquire "firsthand knowledge of the history, organization, and functions" of an agency in order to make what he called a "critical analysis" of its records.³ Similarly, Theodore Schellenberg stated that the analysis of records, involving the study of the "organizational and functional origins of records," is "basic to practically all activities of the archivist."⁴ Indeed, one of the two

tests proposed by Schellenberg for determining the evidential value of records is whether they contain information concerning the "organization, functions, activities, and methods of procedure" of administrative entities.⁵

The views of these authorities reflect a conception of administrative history as a tool, albeit an important one, for carrying out the steps in the archival process. But in an article published in 1941 and addressed to federal archivists, Karl L. Trever suggested a broader conception of the role of administrative history in the archival profession.⁶ Trever stressed the importance of administrative history for the processing and use of archival materials. But he went beyond this conventional view of administrative history as a tool to propose that it should be part of the "cultural background" of the federal archivist. The federal archivist, Trever declared,

must get the general idea of administration as the way in which governments carry out their functions. He must obtain a comprehensive picture of the manner in which the American people, through agencies of government, have met their needs. He must see administrative history as a part of the cultural history of the United States, to see it as it ties in with the economic, social, political, and military history of the people, relating the changing organizations and functions of governmental administration to the expanding or contracting developments and needs of a democratic community. He must see the records created by these changing organizations and functions as a 'living photograph' of a growing people working out their problems. Only from this point of view can the federal archivist see the details of his daily tasks in the proper perspective as related to the larger framework of national culture; . . .⁷

It is the duty of archivists to the historical and archival sciences, Trever declared, to take the lead in "the collection, preservation, and preparation of materials for the study and writing of . . . administrative history." Administrative history, Trever concluded, is a fundamental means through which the federal archivist can fulfill the trust placed in him or her to conserve the records of "government's past activities as an instrumentality of the people" and make them "the living heritage of democracy."⁸

Trever summarized and synthesized ideas that were current among archivists at the time he wrote concerning the importance of administrative history to government archival work.⁹ But these ideas, with suitable qualifications, are relevant to the work of archivists in all institutional settings. All organizations—political, economic, educational, and social—have contributed to the growth and development of American society. This is not an original idea, of course. Recently, an “organizational synthesis” school has emerged in history, the central theme of which is that the transformation of the United States into an industrialized and urbanized society was accompanied by the growth of large-scale, bureaucratic organizations that have had an important, if not decisive, role in shaping all of the institutions of the society.¹⁰ The implication of this idea for archivists is that the records of these organizations, no less than those of the federal government, document the struggle of a people to build a nation. The archivists in these organizations, no less than those in government, must view the administrative history of their organizations as part of the cultural history of the nation. Administrative history must also be part of their cultural background and a means through which they make the history of their institutions part of the nation’s heritage; and it is their duty, as much as it is that of government archivists, to collect, preserve, and prepare materials for the study and writing of administrative history.

Trever’s article appears to have made no significant impression on the work or the intellectual life of the profession. In the four decades after the appearance of the article, no articles of consequence focusing on the subject appeared in the *American Archivist*, and only one paper in the other literature of the profession.¹¹ While archivists use administrative history (in an elementary form) as a tool in archival processing, and while the collection and preservation of materials bearing on administrative history is implicit in their basic professional function, they have apparently not seen it as their professional duty to prepare materials for the study and writing of administrative history by others, much less undertake such study and writing themselves.

To gain an appreciation of the place occupied by administrative history in the archival profession today, an informal, exploratory mail survey of the practices and opinions of a sample of leading

archivists was carried out in the spring of 1979.¹² The survey population included head archival officials in the 50 states, 12 chief provincial and national archival officials in Canada, and the 31 heads of the major United States and Canadian archival education programs. Of the 93 archival officials and educators, 91 returned completed questionnaires for a response rate of 97.8%. The survey was designed, first, to assess how important administrative history is, in the opinion of the officials and educators, to the work of archivists; second, to assess the extent to which officials and educators considered administrative history to be an important part of the "cultural background" of the archivist and a "fundamental means" for fulfillment of his or her mission; and third, to gather information on the arrangements for training archivists in administrative history both in archival institutions and in archival education programs.

With respect to the first point, both officials and educators agreed almost unanimously (96.6% and 92.3% respectively) and not unexpectedly, that administrative history is essential to carrying out the archival functions. Concerning the second point, almost all of the archival officials (98.3%) and a lesser proportion of the educators (88.9%) indicated that they thought administrative history was important to the "cultural background" of the archivist. Almost all of the officials (94.8%) and a substantial proportion of the educators (76.9%) responded that they considered administrative history to be a "fundamental means" through which the archivist can fulfill his mission. And regarding the third point, the arrangements for training archivists in administrative history, one-third of the archival educators reported that part of a course (usually a course in methodology) in their programs was devoted to the subject. None of them indicated that their programs included a course devoted exclusively to the subject. A substantial number of educators (82.1%) agreed that training staff members in administrative history in archival organizations was valuable. Almost all of the archival officials (96.6%) reported that staff members received training in administrative history through on-the-job experience, and only a few (16.9%) indicated that staff members received formal training on the subject.

The results of the survey suggest, first, that the general view in the profession is that administrative history is an important aspect

of the work of the archivist;¹³ second, that there is considerable agreement in the profession with Trever's ideas concerning the general relevance of administrative history (in contrast to its importance as a tool) to archival work; and third, that despite the importance which thus appears to be attached to administrative history by the profession, the arrangements for training in the subject are quite limited.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that administrative history can make a more substantial contribution to the professional growth of the individual archivist and to the development of the archival profession than it does as it is presently defined and used; and to propose what archivists and the profession as a whole can do to make this contribution a reality.

One of the points raised by some of the survey respondents in their written comments, and by other archivists in interviews, concerned the nature or content of administrative history, and its intellectual or cultural significance. Some denied that there was such a thing as administrative history, while others suggested that it was and could be nothing more than a compilation of the significant legal and administrative events in the lives of organizations, valuable only as a tool for carrying out the archival functions.

The extensive research and writing by historians and political scientists in a subject which is referred to by them as administrative history would appear to demonstrate as well as anything that the subject is an identifiable and recognized field of study. Gerald Nash has included a bibliography of some of this work in his *Perspectives on Administration: The Vistas of History*. Included are studies in the ancient, medieval, and modern periods; in government, the military, the church, and business; and studies from institutional functional, biographical, psychological, entrepreneurial, and other "perspectives."

But what is the content of these studies in administrative history? Trever proposed that federal administrative history is concerned with "the development, organization, functions, and activities" of the agencies of the federal government.¹⁴ This is actually a description of administrative history in its usual role as an archival tool in any institutional setting. It is too narrow for Trever's idea of administrative history as part of the "cultural

history" of the nation, and of the "cultural background" of the archivist. What is needed is a conception of the subject matter of administrative history which is broad enough to encompass both its role as an archival tool, on the one hand, and its place in the "cultural history" of the nation, on the other.

Such a conception is provided by distinguishing between what might be labelled "history of administration" and "administrative history."¹⁵ The focus of history of administration is the origin and development of the structure, functions, and activities; the procedures, policies, and programs; and any other aspect of a public or private organization. The focus of administrative history, on the other hand, is more on the role of social, political, economic, and cultural factors in the origin and development of an organization, and the impact of the organization on these factors. Administrative history does not neglect the organizational matters which are the concern of history of administration, but the emphasis is on the interaction between the organization and the social environment.

With respect to form, histories of administration may range from simple lists or compilations of the legal administrative acts by which an organization, or some aspect of it, originated and developed; to digests which cover the same information but in more detail and in narrative form; to studies which (at least at their best) deal analytically and in some depth with the origin and development of an organization, or some aspect of it, in relation to external factors. Compilations and digests are the usual forms of history of administration prepared by archivists as tools for selection, accessioning, and arrangement, and as finding aids. Studies in history of administration and in administrative history are more likely to be prepared by scholars in history, political science, public administration, or economics. As a practical matter, archivists will be more concerned with the forms of history of administration than with administrative history. Both have a large potential contribution to make to the professional growth of the archivist and to the development of the archival profession, however.¹⁶ (In the subsequent discussion, administrative history refers to both history of administration and administrative history.)

Any contribution of administrative history to the archival

profession can, of course, take place only through the activities of individual archivists, and what they will do will be determined by their backgrounds and interests, and by the time and resources available to them in their particular institutional settings. At the present time, as suggested earlier, the role of administrative history appears to be confined for the most part to the compilations and digests which are prepared by archivists as tools for collection administration. These basic forms of administrative history, while essential to the work of the archivist and the mission of the profession, do not make a substantial contribution to the professional growth of the archivist, or to the development of the archival profession.

There are, however, at least four additional ways by which the contribution of administrative history can be expanded. First, archivists can systematically study published and unpublished works in administrative history which pertain to their particular institutions and to other similar or related institutions. They can conduct research in administrative history (beyond that necessary to prepare the basic compilations and digests) for the purpose of preparing advanced finding aids, bibliographic guides, synopses, and other materials for the use of scholars. They can themselves research and write studies in administrative history for internal use or publication. And they can contribute to the preparation of other archivists for study, research, and writing in administrative history by means of instruction and the preparation of instructional materials.

At each level—study, research, writing, and instruction—the contribution of administrative history to the professional growth of the archivist, and to the development of the archival profession, will increase. The archivist will acquire a broader foundation for carrying out the basic archival functions, an appreciation of the relationships of his or her collections to those in other repositories, and an understanding of the connections between the history of his or her institution, and the social, economic, and political history of the larger society. From the standpoint of the profession, its mission will be accomplished more effectively because of the increased effectiveness of individual archivists in carrying out their work; its knowledge base will be expanded through dissemination of a knowledge of administrative history among archivists and

the accumulation of administrative history studies; and its moral legitimacy as a profession will be reinforced because the relationships between the work of the profession and the realization of fundamental values in the larger society will be revealed.

There are a number of steps that the profession as a whole should undertake to facilitate and support the work in administrative history of individual archivists. First, archivists must be encouraged and supported by the profession (and by their employing institutions) to contribute to the role of administrative history in the profession at whatever level—study, research, writing, instruction—they find it possible to do so. To prepare them for this work, course work in administrative history should be part of archival education programs and of the formal training programs in archival institutions, and regional seminars on the subject should be offered, perhaps under the auspices of the Society of American Archivists or regional professional associations. The SAA could also sponsor the development of model courses and basic course materials in administrative history for such programs and seminars. And to support archivists in this work, a methodology manual on research in administrative history should be prepared, and the large number of published and unpublished studies on the subject available in libraries and repositories should be brought under bibliographic control, projects which also could be undertaken by the SAA. And finally, preparation in the methodology and subject matter of administrative history should be made a professional requirement for archivists. With respect to the last point, Frank B. Evans has urged that administrative history be part of the formal educational background of archivists; and according to the SAA “Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs,” administrative history is a subdivision of one of five “theory elements” that must be covered by courses in archival theory.¹⁷

This essay is intended as a preliminary statement in what, it is hoped, will become a creative dialogue on the issue of the place of administrative history in the work, intellectual foundations, and mission of the profession. One important line of criticism which perhaps can be anticipated is that an increased emphasis on administrative history would fall squarely within, and reinforce, the traditional concern of the profession with the records of

established institutions and elites, at a time when the profession should be turning its attention to compiling "a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people."¹⁸ It is true that administrative history is central to the customary orientation of the archival profession to large-scale bureaucratic institutions in the public and private sectors. But the critics do not advocate that the profession abandon its concern for the records and documents of these institutions, which have been and will continue to be a dominant force in American society, but only that it broaden its perspective to include those of social history as well. And as the archival legacy of public and private bureaucracies increases in volume and complexity, archivists will need more than ever before a solid foundation of administrative history for their work. Nor is administrative history unrelated to the new concern for social history. Buried in the records of large bureaucracies is the evidence for the "processing" of millions of ordinary people. To locate these records, to extract information from them, to understand the purposes and procedures, the values, definitions, and assumptions which underlie this processing, requires a thorough knowledge of the administrative history of these institutions.

Archives administration displays most of the features of an established profession: an association, a journal, a code of ethics, requirements for admission, and so on. But just because an occupation has the formal characteristics of a profession does not necessarily mean that it is a fully developed profession. Indeed, Herman Kahn has noted that the professional status of their vocation seems to be a matter of concern to archivists. Their tendency to reassure each other constantly that archives administration is a profession, and that archivists are professionals, reflects "some nervousness" on their part about it.¹⁹

I would like to suggest that the commitment of archives administration to administrative service and records management as primary missions has hindered the emergence of full professionalism, because it has prevented the development of the substantive characteristics of professionalism, and has encouraged the view that archives administration is just another staff function. As a result, the strongly proclaimed convictions of archivists notwithstanding, archives administration is probably not held to be a

profession by the larger society. And it is this evaluation which must be the ultimate goal of professionalization, for only society can bestow the legal monopoly of a key social function, the occupational autonomy, the rewards, and the prestige which an established profession such as medicine or law receives, and which confirms its status and acceptance as a profession.

A reorientation of archives administration away from its preoccupation with administrative service and records management toward the cultural-historical mission which was relegated to the background years ago for the sake of professional and bureaucratic security would open up new opportunities for professional development. Study, research, writing, and instruction in administrative history by archivists, encouraged and supported by the profession as a whole, would make a substantial contribution to the renaissance of the profession's cultural-historical mission.²⁰

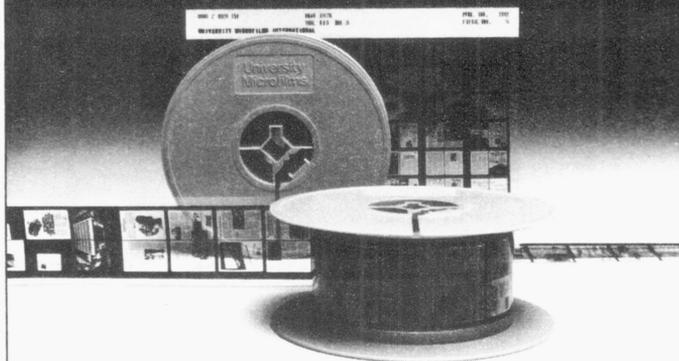
FOOTNOTES

1. Waldo Leland, "The National Archives: A Programme," *American Historical Review* 18 (October 1912): 24.
2. S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1968), pp. 52-59; Thornton W. Mitchell, *Norton on Archives; The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records and Management* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), pp. 48-49.
3. H.G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation; Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 84-85.
4. Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 118.
5. Schellenberg, p. 140.
6. Karl L. Trever, "Administrative History in Federal Archives," *American Archivist* 4 (July 1941): 159-169.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 160, 169.
9. Trever's article was based on material presented in a seminar on Federal administrative history taught by Solon J. Buck and Philip M. Bauer; on research in the National Archives Library; and on a study of the archival manuals of Jenkinson, and of Muller, Feith, and Fruin. Personal interview with Karl L. Trever, May 16, 1979, Arlington, Virginia.
10. Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern History," *Business History Review* 44 (Autumn 1970): 279-290. Also see: Wayne K. Hobson, "Professionals, Progressives and Bureaucratization: a

Reassessment." *Historian* 39 (August 1977): 639-658 (and the material cited therein); and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). In his survey of the study of administrative history, Gerald Nash takes as his thesis "that civilizations have flourished and maintained themselves only as they were able to effect a satisfactory balance between cultural achievement and the development of an organizational framework." Gerald D. Nash, *Perspectives on Administration: The Vistas of History* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California-Berkeley, 1969), Parts I-IV.

11. The only paper besides Trever's on the place of administrative history in archival work which could be located was Hugh A. Taylor, "Administrative History: An Archivist's Need," *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 1 (1970): 4-9. Also see the accompanying paper: V. Seymour Wilson, "Administrative History: An Historian's Opportunity," pp. 9-17; and the discussion of the two papers, pp. 17-20. The literature search did not extend to published administrative histories of public and private organizations.
12. The survey was financed entirely from personal funds, and its scope was therefore necessarily limited. I am grateful to all who took time to complete and return the questionnaire.
13. The high level of agreement among archival officials no doubt reflects the fact that administrative history is especially important to archives administration in government. Archivists in non-governmental institutions would probably also agree that administrative history is important to their work, but perhaps would not be as fully convinced on this point as the government archivists.
14. Trever, "Administrative History in Federal Archives," p. 160.
15. A similar distinction was suggested by Taylor in his "Administrative History: An Archivist's Need," p. 5.
16. An example of the potential contribution of administrative history to archival work is provided by Francis X. Blouin, Jr., in his review of Alfred J. Chandler's, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977). Blouin suggests that Chandler's book will help business archivists with the appraisal process by answering questions about the evolution of corporate structure, the business activities which created various types of records, and the character of record keeping practices. Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "A New Perspective on the Appraisal of Business Records: A Review," *American Archivist* 42 (July 1979): 312-320.
17. Frank B. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," *American Archivist* 40 (January 1977): 72-73; *SAA Newsletter* (May 1977) pp. 4-5.
18. Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 25; also see: Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "The Shame of the Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 27-34; and Fredric M. Miller "Social History and Archival Practice," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 113-124.
19. Herman Kahn, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation," *American Archivist* 34 (January 1971): 5.
20. Copies of a "Selected Bibliography on Administrative History," prepared in conjunction with this article, are available from the author at the Department of Management, College of Business, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI 53190.

This publication
is available in microform.



University Microfilms International

Please send additional information

Name _____

Institution _____

Street _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

300 North Zeeb Road
Dept. P.R.
Ann Arbor, Mi. 48106
U.S.A.

30-32 Mortimer Street
Dept. P.R.
London W1N 7RA
England