

**SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS**  
**ARCHIVAL HISTORY ROUNDTABLE**  
**NEWSLETTER**

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**ARCHIVAL HISTORY ROUNDTABLE ANNUAL MEETING:**

The Roundtable will convene at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Philadelphia on Saturday, September 28, at 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.. The theme of this year's meeting is Archivists and World War II and two presentations will be given. Daniel Linke, of the New York State Archives and previously an NHPRC Fellow, will be speaking on the records of the New York State War Council. During the war, New York State, like most states, created a state war council and many local councils. These councils created an enormous quantity of records and by the end of the war there existed major problems and opportunities for retention and disposition decisions leading to the preservation of historically significant archival resources. New York State's War Council made a good choice in selecting a history professor named Karl Hartzell to carry out the mission of saving these records and Mr. Linke will discuss the actions taken by this archival novice in carrying out his responsibilities. James Corsaro will present the second paper, which will be a brief overview of what archivists were doing during the war and will suggest possible avenues for research into the archival history of the era.

Few items of business for discussion at the meeting have been submitted. The chair is interested in hearing from anyone with items which they wish to have discussed. If you have anything that you think would be of interest to attendees at the meeting, including current research, new publications about any archival history topic, archival history education or other topics, please contact the chair prior to the meeting.

**SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS ANNUAL MEETING 1992**

The Society of American Archivists will be meeting in Montreal in 1992 in conjunction with the International Congress on Archives, the Association of Canadian Archivists and the Association des Archivistes du Quebec. In addition to being able to overdose on archival topics and issues of all sorts, archival enthusiasts should have an opportunity to hear papers with an archival history theme. The chair has been gathering suggestions for sessions and will present these at the business meeting in Philadelphia. Other suggestions for topics and speakers are very welcome and should be mentioned at the meeting, where we can have general discussion of likely topics. Keep in mind the international context of this meeting as the Program Committee is especially favorable to papers and themes with a "global theme."

## **TRANSITION AND OPPORTUNITY**

After two years in office, the current chair will relinquish his responsibilities at the end of this year's annual meeting. Anyone interested in chairing the roundtable should contact the chair prior to the meeting. If there is more than one person interested, we will hold an election for the next chair. Another, perhaps better, option, if there are only two or three persons interested, is to run the roundtable as a committee. The current chair will pass on the roundtable's "archives" to the incoming chair and will be happy to provide advice and suggestions, if needed. Also, since the program suggestions for the 1992 meeting will be required shortly after the Philadelphia meeting, the chair will be happy to assist in putting any roundtable session before the Program Committee.

## **NEW PUBLICATION FROM SAA**

The "Archival Fundamentals Series" being published by the Society of American Archivists has a new publication entitled Understanding Archives and Manuscripts authored by James M. O'Toole. This publication includes a substantial section on "The History of Archives and the Archival Profession" as well as other related sections concerning the "Rise and Spread of Literacy" and the "Technology of Record Making." This new SAA manual is a useful introduction to the history of our profession and provides students and novice archivists with informative clues to how we became what we are today.

## **GETTING READY FOR OUR CANADIAN SOJOURN**

The Newsletter is happy to present our first published contribution by a Canadian archivist in this issue. Terry Cook, Chief of the Social Affairs and Natural Resources Section of the National Archives of Canada has written previously about the history of government archives in Canada, but presents here a short introduction to the entire subject for our instruction. His interesting article will help to prepare us for our journey to Montreal next year. The Roundtable over the past few years has drawn several Canadian archivists to both the annual meeting and as subscribers to the Newsletter. We are happy to welcome this excellent contribution to the publication history of the roundtable.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA**

**BY TERRY COOK**

**NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA**

Unlike the experience of the National Archives and Records Administration or its West European counterparts, Canada's national archives was not founded to preserve the records of its sponsoring body. Indeed, until the 1960's, there was no administrative unit



with the National Archives of Canada specifically devoted to the archival records of the Government of Canada. Only in the mid-1980's have government records become the National Archives' first operational priority. This rather contrary historical evolution may interest American readers, for it highlights trends that are international in scope and implication.

When the Canadian government appointed an Archivist in 1872 in response to literary and historical writers' lobbying, that official had no responsibility whatsoever for the records of the federal government -- normally the central function of a national archives. For many years, the Archives Branch (as his unit within the Department of Agriculture soon became known) confined its activities to private papers and records of the imperial governments of France and Great Britain relating to Canada. Yet the preservation of federal government archival records was not entirely ignored. In 1873, a Keeper of Records was appointed in the Department of the Secretary of State to arrange the official and historical records of the Government of Canada. However, this official mainly devoted his time to indexing the records of the colonial administrative entities which predated the Canadian Confederation of 1867.

Growing concern over the lack of a uniform system of records keeping in the government as a whole, coupled with large losses of older records in several disastrous fires, prompted the federal government to form a Departmental Commission on Public Records. It recommended in 1898 that the activities of the Archives Branch, the Records Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State, and sundry other records offices, be centralized in one agency. In 1903, therefore, the Archives Branch was made responsible for public records as well as private manuscripts. This concept was enshrined in the Public Archives Act of 1912 which established the Public Archives of Canada as an independent agency responsible for "public records, documents and other historical material of every kind, nature and description...."

Despite this sweeping mandate, "public records" remained a low priority in the new institution for many years, perhaps because of the emphasis on private records in the old Archives Branch before 1903. For example, a concerned Royal Commission on Public Records recommended in 1914 that no government record be destroyed without the approval of the Treasury Board, the Canadian government's central administrative policy agency, and that all historical government records must be transferred to the Public Archives of Canada. Despite this hopeful sign, restraints imposed by two world wars and the depression postponed the realization of such an orderly system of records and archival management until the 1950's.

With the Second World War came the rapid proliferation of government programs and an accompanying growth in the volume of paperwork. This set the stage for important changes in the management of government records. An interdepartmental Public Records Committee was established in 1945 to offer advice on the storage, microfilming, general management, and orderly disposal of federal government records. The Dominion (now National) Archivist sat on this body of senior officials. The growing



importance of government records was again underlined by the recommendation of the Massey Commission in 1951 that a separate Public Records Office be established to deal with the now-recognized serious past neglect of public records. The federal government responded instead by creating the Public Archives Records Centre within the Archives. This branch was to be a "half-way house" between the records management work of the Public Records Committee and government departments on the one hand, and the archival programs of the Public Archives on the other. Its key roles were to co-ordinate the preparation of departmental records schedules, to store dormant records in new records centres, to arrange for the orderly destruction of routine records, and to facilitate the transfer to the Archives of those records having permanent value. These developments, reflected in the Public Records Order (1966), effectively and formally linked the Archives' traditional mandate to acquire historical records with one for improved management (including now-mandatory scheduling) of current records still controlled by departments. This linkage continued to be strengthened in the 1970's and 1980's by new policies, directives, and legislation in records management and in access and privacy.

These postwar changes in the broader world of government information management proved to be a significant turning point in the acquisition of archival textual government records: under the new approach, more such records were acquired during the 1960's than in the previous nine decades combined of the Archives' existence. These external developments were finally reflected in the internal structure of the Public Archives. In 1965 the Public Records Section was established within the Manuscript Division (which collected private papers primarily), the first time in the then ninety-three-year history of the Public Archives that a specific unit became exclusively responsible for the archival records of the federal government. This unit grew to become the separate Public Records Division in 1973, which in 1979 was renamed the Federal Archives Division.

While their history is obviously shorter, government electronic records have suffered from the same neglect as did their paper counterparts in earlier times, and it has been just as costly. Because of the extreme fragility and transience of electronic records, and their dependence on rapidly outdated technology, most data before the later 1970's are lost forever. The Public Archives was one of the first in the world to respond to this crisis with the creation of its Machine Readable Archives Division in 1973. However, the inexperience of the paper-based records management community concerning electronic records, combined with the absence within departments of a distinct group with a concern for the retention and disposal of electronic data, lead to difficulties, as departments made little progress towards the orderly scheduling and disposal of their electronic records. Thus, significant acquisitions of electronic records resulted mainly from episodic contacts between archivists and departments.

By the 1980's, as central agencies and departments began to concentrate on information as content and resource rather than as medium, the National Archives similarly moved towards information integration for the two key media found in all government institutions. Accordingly, the two divisions most concerned with



government records -- the Federal Archives Division and the Machine Readable Archives Division -- were merged in 1986 to form the new Government Archives Division. With the National Archives of Canada Act of 1987, government records finally became ascendant. Federal departments must receive the permission of the National Archivist before destroying records in any media. The act also provides for the transfer of records having historical or archival value to the National Archives and it significantly expands the number of institutions with which such formal arrangements are required. Thus, the act strengthens the role and scope of the Archives considerably.

This cursory historical overview may indicate why the "total archives" concept, which combines public and private records under one institution, was articulated first in Canada, before spreading through ICA programs to many Third World and other countries. Private, non-governmental records not only had a role but, until recently, the leading role, within Canadian archival institutions. They did not have to fight for recognition and resources with government records programs; rather, it was the other way around. The change itself occurred less because archives evolve in response to research trends or users' needs rather than that they reflect the contemporary information context of the records creators, and resultant policy and legislation. That insight in turn may cause archivists to reassess their practice and even theory on several fronts, but that is another story!

### **Further Reading**

Readers wishing to explore this subject further should start with Ian E. Wilson, "'A Noble Dream': The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada [1872-1948]," and William G. Ormsby, "The Public Archives of Canada, 1948-1968," both in Archivaria 15 (Winter, 1982-83); and Jay Atherton, "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1956," Archivaria 8 (Summer 1979). More information is available in the introductory sections written by Terry Cook, in Government Archives Division, C. Lovering, compiler, (Ottawa, 1991). See also Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives,'" Archivaria 9 (Winter 1979-80). An earlier essay is still valuable; see Hugh A. Taylor, "Canadian Archives: Patterns from a Federal Perspective," Archivaria 2 (Summer 1976).

(The Archival History Newsletter is published twice yearly by the SAA Archival History Roundtable. Any communications, articles or news of interest to the membership and available for inclusion in the Newsletter should be sent to the Chairperson, James Corsaro, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12230; e. mail RLIN bm.n2A or phone (518) 474-5963.)