

# **Records of the Presidency: Presidential Papers and Libraries from Washington to Reagan**

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Foreword by President Gerald R. Ford



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## THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF THE UNITED STATES

The story of official American records starts with the first meetings of the Continental Congress on September 5, 1774, when Charles Thomson was unanimously chosen by the assembly to serve as secretary to the Congress. After the reorganization of the government in 1789, Thomson deposited the congressional records at the Department of State, which became the custodian of essential documents; however, other agencies continued to store their own records.

The greatest dangers to the collection of historic and essential records over the years have been loss, deterioration of paper, and fires. The fires that played havoc with federal records started to attract national attention in the early 1800s when they destroyed valuable records in the War Department and the Treasury. In 1810, Congress showed a concern for archival responsibilities by establishing a Committee on Ancient Public Records and Archives of the United States, which reported that the "papers are in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe nor convenient nor honorable to the nation."<sup>18</sup> In the end no action was taken, but the idea that the country needed a safe, permanent place to store its records had been born.

On August 24, 1814, the British burned the Capitol and the Library of Congress. In 1836, the Post Office and the Patent Office sustained losses by fire, followed by a Treasury fire in 1838. Louis McLane, secretary of the Treasury, reported to President Andrew Jackson that there was no secure place for documents in the State, War, and Navy departments. Jackson responded by requesting from Congress the erection of a suitable depository. However, before any significant progress was made at the Treasury, a fire at the Post Office received higher repair priority. Building materials already purchased for the Treasury were transferred to the Post Office. Treasury building repair did not reach completion until the early 1860s. In 1870, a fire did great damage to government buildings and records; a congressional committee was appointed and issued a report that aroused the interest of President Hayes, who requested a \$200,000 appropriation for the construction of a fireproof building, but again, no action was taken.

A fire in 1877 destroyed part of the Department of Interior and became a landmark because it aroused for the first time a sense of urgency in Congress for a fireproof depository for federal records where different departments could store and retrieve their documents. In 1880 and 1881 fires damaged the War Department; over 40 fires occurred between 1881 and 1912. Delays and indecision finally gave way in 1896 when a bill was passed for a storage facility that was referred to as a hall of records. Funding for this project passed five years later, but construction did not start at the chosen site until 1926 and the National Archives building was not opened until 1934.

The recurring series of delays in establishing the National Archives, despite continual losses to fire or improper storage, is remarkable. Several factors may have been involved: a lack of strong conviction in Congress for its responsibility to preserve historic records; no organized group to keep the preservation issue before Congress long enough to achieve suc-

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cess; and the constant temptation to take the easy and cheap way out by storing documents in a leaky attic or damp basement where conditions would take their toll over time.

During the nineteenth century, while important records were being badly and inefficiently stored and substantially devastated, archival problems were studied but solutions never implemented. Between 1789 and 1903 all congressional records were deposited at the Department of State; in 1903 they were transferred to the Library of Congress and some 30 years later to the National Archives.

Several events strengthened the faltering drive toward the organization of an archives facility. In 1884, the American Historical Association was founded, and six years later it organized its Public Archives Commission. At that time, J. Franklin Jameson, generally considered the father of the American archives movement, came on the scene. Jameson received one of the first American Ph.D. degrees in history, and served from 1905 to 1928 as editor of the *American Historical Review*, and simultaneously as head of the Carnegie Institution's Department of Historical Research. He was president of the American Historical Association and concluded his career as director of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Jameson studied archives in Europe and was the leading advocate for the establishment of an American National Archives. He was supported by his former student, Waldo Gifford Leland, who, some 35 years later, was involved in the establishment of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Jameson and some of his colleagues concluded that the essential task for starting an archives movement was to find out where archives already existed in the United States. This investigation was undertaken by Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland in 1906. Their study of existing American archives was published in 1907 by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress as *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States*.<sup>19</sup>

In 1907, Jameson asked President Theodore Roosevelt, who was interested in the archives project, for space estimates from the secretaries of his administration. Roosevelt also corresponded on this topic with Herbert Putnam, the librarian of Congress, who supported the archives development but stressed that an archival function should not be added to the responsibilities of the Library.<sup>20</sup>

In 1908 the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association appointed a committee to study the preservation of federal records. Two years later this group reported that "records are in many cases stored where they are in danger of destruction from fire and in places which are not adapted to their preservation, and where they are inaccessible for administrative and historical purposes. . . . Many of the records of the Government have in the past been lost or destroyed because suitable provisions for their care and preservation was not made."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the American Historical Association petitioned Congress for the erection of a national archives depository where the records of the government could be concentrated, properly cared for, and preserved.

In 1911, Jameson appeared before a House committee in support of this petition and entered into the records of the hearings a history of the movement for national archives. In 1912, Waldo G. Leland published his article, "The National Archives: A Program," in the *American Historical Review*,<sup>22</sup> continuing the argument that archives are recognized in all civilized countries as a natural and proper function of government.

In 1913, Congress authorized plans for an archives building not to exceed \$1,500,000, but the outbreak of the First World War interrupted these plans until 1925, when President Calvin Coolidge recommended construction of a building for the records of the government. By that time, the construction of the building had become a national issue supported by the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution. In 1926, Congress appropriated \$6,900,000 and the secretary of the Treasury was authorized to develop contracts for the construction of the facility.

In 1930, estimates made to determine the quantity of government records to be accommodated indicated that over 3.5 million cubic feet were already in existence. When President Hoover laid the cornerstone for the new building on February 20, 1933, he said:

... there will be aggregated here the most sacred documents of our history, the originals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Here will be preserved all the other records that bind State to State and the hearts of all our people in an indissoluble union.<sup>23</sup>

On December 9, 1931, Senator Reed Smoot introduced two bills to establish an organizational structure for the archives; they included provisions for the appointment of an archivist by the president with consent of the Senate and the establishment of an Archives Council.<sup>24</sup> Neither bill passed Congress. In 1934, as the new records building neared completion, Senator Henry Keyes of New Hampshire introduced a similar bill that also failed. In that same year, archives legislation introduced by Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee and Congressman Sol Bloom of New York passed on April 16. Bloom's bill originally created a United States Bureau of Archives within the Department of Interior, operating under the administrative authority of an Archives Commission and headed by an archivist appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate. However, with the assistance of J. Franklin Jameson, Senator Thomas P. Martin of New York introduced a bill to create a separate independent agency. The final Senate bill containing this idea passed on June 10, 1934. A compromise bill worked out between the House and Senate, the Archives Act, PL73-432, was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 16. Congress also appropriated \$50,000 to begin the agency's work during 1935.

While the building was still under construction, the president appointed Robert D.W. Connor as the first archivist. There were about 320 employees to be hired, equipment to be purchased and installed, and regulations to be written for coping with the millions of cubic feet of records scattered throughout the country. In addition, there were almost 18 million feet of motion pictures, 2.25 million photographic negatives,

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and 5,500 sound records to be dealt with in the Washington area alone, and untold quantities of records not yet counted in other states.

One of the major achievements of the Archives Act was that it broadened the National Archives' responsibility beyond the acquisition of historic documents into other and more modern media. One of the dreams of Jameson, the establishment of the National Historical Publications Committee (NHPC), was also realized; the NHPC received the mandate to make plans and recommendations for the writing and publication of historical works.

In 1941, President Roosevelt spoke at the dedication of the Archives Building in the following unforgettable terms:

As President I accept this newest house in which the people's record is preserved—public papers and collections which refer to one period in our history. This latest addition to the Archives of America is dedicated at the moment when government of the people by themselves is everywhere attacked. It is therefore proof—if any is needed—that our confidence in the future of democracy has not diminished and will not diminish.<sup>25</sup>

In 1949, in accordance with the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act, the National Archives lost its status as an independent agency and was merged with the General Services Administration. The responsibility for administering presidential libraries was given to the Archives in 1955. The National Archives and Records Administration Act of 1984 re-established the National Archives as an independent agency, an event celebrated at the Archives by the distribution of oversized campaign buttons with the message "Free at Last."