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AGREEMENT WITH THE
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
AS TO ORAL HISTORY STATEMENT

I, Lester J. Cappon, of Chicago, Illinois, in accordance with the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 C.F.R. 101-110), hereby assign to the United States for administration by the National Archives and Records Service all my rights, title, and interest, including any literary property rights that I may have in it, in the statement written by me in June 1974 in response to questions submitted by Philip C. Brooks on behalf of the National Archives and Records Service.

It is agreed that the statement will be available under the regulations prescribed by the Archivist of the United States as soon as it has been deposited in final form in the National Archives. It is also agreed that only the National Archives and Records Service shall have the right to publish or authorize the publication of the statement in whole or in part, aside from quotation in the normal concept of "fair use", providing that I or my heirs, legal representatives or assigns retain the right to publish in other form the accounts or opinions set forth.

Signed Lester J. Cappon
Date 7 August 1974

Accepted:

Signed James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

Date Sept. 16, 1974

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Statement By

LESTER J. CAPPON

June 1974

Major Biographical Information:

Born, Milwaukee, Wisconsin	1900
A.B., M.A., University of Wisconsin	1922, 1923
Ph.D., Harvard University	1928
History Department, University of Virginia; Archivist, University of Virginia Library	1930-1945
Director, Virginia Historical Records Survey	1936-1937
Archivist, Colonial Williamsburg; Consultant	1945-1952; 1952-1969
Lecturer in History, College of William and Mary	1946-1964
Director, Institute of Early American History and Culture	1955-1969
Director, Institute on Historical and Archival Management, Radcliffe College Summer	1956-1960
Editor-in-Chief, Atlas of Early American History, Newberry Library	1969

(Commenting on questions posed by Philip C. Brooks)

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Comments By

Lester J. Cappon

Former Director, Institute of Early American History

1. My interest in archival matters before the National Archives. In 1930 the University of Virginia initiated a program for the collection and preservation of manuscripts and other historical records, especially pertaining to Virginia, and I was appointed archivist of the University of Virginia Library to implement and carry on the program. (The title was a misnomer. The University had a small collection of manuscripts, mainly Jefferson, Lee, and Poe papers; and after the collecting program was under way and there was a flow of manuscripts into the library, John Cook Wyllie was appointed curator of manuscripts. In the course of the operation the University's own records came into consideration; but until the new building, the Alderman Library, was occupied in the spring of 1938, there was no place to gather together and administer the University Archives. My part in the program continued to be field work, and later, at my suggestion, my title was changed to "consultant in archives"; I was also assistant professor of history).

During my travels throughout Virginia I met many of the county clerks who often gave me leads to family manuscripts, local merchants' records, etc., many of which I was able to acquire for the University Library. I also began to delve into the county records, most of them untouched except by lawyers and occasional genealogists; and I learned something about the state of preservation (and lack of it) of these records before the Historical Records Survey began its inventory work in 1936. Thus I conceived the overly-ambitious idea of a Guide, in several volumes, to the historical records of Virginia. By the time the HRS went into operation I had made rough inventories, on 3 x 5 cards, of the bound volumes of records of some dozen counties in which I had done field work and had won the confidence of the county clerks. I also became interested in the Virginia State Archives, for which there was no inventory, and in the course of this investigation I ran afoul of the testy state archivist, Morgan P. Robinson--but that is another story.

These early experiences indicate that my interest in archives stemmed from the pursuit of "historical manuscripts" which were for the most part in the nature of family archives, although I was not yet thinking in those terms. However, I suppose this developing interest became part of the background for my article, years later, on "Historical Manuscripts as Archives" in the American Archivist, April 1956. My rough inventories of county records

were never refined or prepared for publication, mainly because this field became the chief concern of the Virginia HRS, of which I was the first director. (The only published volume in my proposed Guide to the Historical Records of Virginia was Virginia Newspapers, 1821-1935: a Bibliography (1936), now out of print). Because of my intimate connection with growing interest in historical records in Virginia, I was somewhat conversant with the contemporary development nationally that led to the establishment of the National Archives.

2. My early association with the National Archives. A great desire to see the new building in 1935 was doubtless a factor in making my first contacts; and this was facilitated by an occasional meeting of HRS state directors, called by Dr. Luther H. Evans, the national director. However, my early relations with the National Archives were as a user of the records. My research on the history of the southern iron industry begun as a graduate student at Harvard, included the period of the Confederacy, and the transfer of War Department records to the National Archives made accessible, perhaps for the first time, those pertaining to southern industry. From this research and the cordial cooperation of the late Jesse Douglas of the War Department Division of NA resulted "A List of Confederate Ordnance Records in the National Archives," published in the Journal (1940) of the American Military Institute, of which Douglas was editor, and "Government

and Private Business in the Southern Confederacy," in Humanistic Studies in Honor of John Calvin Metcalf (1941), published by the University of Virginia. During the course of these visits I became acquainted with many of the early members of the NA staff, and those acquaintanceships were further facilitated by membership in the newly organized Society of American Archivists.

3. R. D. W. Connor, first archivist of the U.S. I never knew Dr. Connor very well, but I respected and admired him as scholar and archivist for his distinguished work in North Carolina. He was a kindly person and I always thought of him as the benevolent elder statesman. During his recruiting of staff members he called on me at the University of Virginia, in 1935, if I remember correctly. I was surprised and flattered, but I think he sensed that I was very much engrossed in the University's manuscript program and in my teaching. In any case, he did not offer me a job. The fact that Dr. Connor was recommended to President Roosevelt by the American Historical Association for appointment was advantageous, I think, to the internal operation of the National Archives, in view of the large number of historians on the professional staff during his regime. Besides, this southern gentleman had learned the ways of politics during his public service in North Carolina and this experience must have served the NA well in Washington. I am not informed on Dr. Connor's ability as an administrator.

Reflecting on the nature of the original organization of the NA, with centralized functional divisions, it seems strange that he did not see the desirability and necessity of records divisions as embodying basic archival functions. Although Dorsey Hyde set up the original organization, one wonders whether Dr. Connor did not pass judgment on it.

4. Functional divisions of NA. Because the transition from centralized function divisions to records divisions in NA occurred during the first six years of its existence, when the number of users of the records was still relatively small, I think the academic world was scarcely cognizant of this change. Besides, few scholars, certainly few historians (I have long since concluded), are aware of fundamental archival principles and therefore of their application to historical method and research.

5. Record groups and finding aids. I regard the record group as the concrete expression of archival organization by records divisions, which is reflected in the finding aids as practical tools of reference. The finding aid, containing condensed records description, was essential and critical in the expanding program of NA; in other words, accessibility must follow on the heels of preservation and processing. The scholar is inclined to take bibliographies, finding aids, etc., for granted and therefore to complain about the lack of them rather than to appreciate those in hand. It is perhaps

significant that the impetus for the finding aid program came from within NA, from Solon J. Buck with the historian's viewpoint; and akin to it was the file microcopy program, which, if I remember correctly, was also his idea.

6. Solon J. Buck, second archivist of the U.S. After Dr. Buck's war-time regime and the flood of records that followed, it may be said that NA "would never be the same again." Dr. Buck was basically a scholar, his position as head of the Publications Division of NA put him in a spot where his experience in historical editing could be used to good advantage. However, research and compilation precede publication, and during his years in that position not much had reached the stage of publication; I suppose the NA Guide (1948) was largely the fruit of his efforts. As a colleague he must have been difficult to work with. His personality reminds me of a characterization of John Adams made by Professor Carl Russell Fish of the University of Wisconsin during my undergraduate days. In his lectures on Representative Americans Fish observed that "John Adams was almost always right, but in the most disagreeable manner." And so it was with Buck, whose judgments were founded on sound principles and careful assembling of the evidence, but who lacked the persuasive manner to "win friends and influence people." Being inclined to speak ex cathedra, he reinforced the determination of his opponents to maintain their position which they might have conceded in a more

favorable atmosphere of give-and-take. Of course Buck was not always right; neither was John Adams, but Adams did not indulge in nit-picking to salvage an indefensible position or to chip away the solid foundation of his opponent's. I admired Buck's great respect for principles, archival and others, and the logical functioning of his mind; but there was a human element lacking that promotes good feeling and assures the desirable end by congenial means. Buck was never convivial even under the most favorable circumstances. I have heard that he lectured the members of the Congressional Appropriations Committee when he was Archivist of the United States, and they were displeased. I can testify as a witness that he often lectured the members of the Council of the Society of American Archivists when he was president and I was secretary, and I was displeased, to put it mildly. In this respect he was a poor administrator, and I have no doubt that he antagonized many of his colleagues in NA as well as members of Congress. One must allow for the fact that he was Archivist during a very difficult period when war conditions augmented the volume of records and necessitated drastic readjustments in NA programs. Buck's primary interest was in historical writing and editing, and it may be said that his most significant contributions in the archival field were really extensions of his work as historian, bibliographer, and historical editor, fortified by his understanding of archival principles and his effective application of them.

His influence in the development of the archival profession in the United States was noteworthy and far-reaching.

7. Inception of the records administration program. This program, initiated during Buck's regime as Archivist of the United States, was both timely and necessary, its pay-off to the scholarly world immeasurable. At the time, however, few historians and social scientists, I am sure, were aware of this program or understood its potential significance because archival problems had not touched the academic world to any great extent. Historians working in "recent" history should have been most concerned, but they found a large volume of printed documentary records for their research and did not understand what records administration was all about. (Neither did many an archivist!) The increasing interest in recent history during the past thirty years must have been stimulated in part by the wide availability of the records and the policy of NA favoring early accessibility.

8. Reference service during World War II. Up to the outbreak of the war the number of scholars using the records in NA or inquiring about them must have been relatively small. Furthermore, during the war much scholarship and research were interrupted by military service, as was the work of archivists; and I think the one factor tended to balance the other.

9. International archival problems. My knowledge of the protection of cultural resources under war conditions came largely through the Society of American Archivists, stimulated by Dr. Waldo G. Leland's concern with these problems as president of the SAA and as secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies. At the University of Virginia we became very conscious of the protection of records from the hazards of war when the Library of Congress transferred some of the Presidential Papers to Charlottesville for safe-keeping--very hush-hush for security purposes and known, presumably, only by upper staff members of the University Library. I was not especially informed about Oliver W. Holmes's work as program adviser to the Archivist of the United States in setting up the International Council on Archives. Years later, however, when the ICA convened in Washington, I attended the meetings and was tremendously impressed by the program and the role of the United States in making the Council an effective organization.

10. Wayne C. Grover as Archivist. I did not become well acquainted with Wayne Grover, but I always found him cordial and outgoing. The fact that he had come up from the ranks of NA was no doubt advantageous in personnel relationships and made for a sharp contrast with the Buck regime. The Grover-Bahmer "partnership" of 18 years must have provided some stability in NA during the years when archivists and records administrators were learning how to live together.

11. NA under GSA. I have always regarded it as unfortunate that NA was able to maintain its status as an independent agency responsible directly to the President of the United States; that it was demeaning to be taken over by General Services Administration, the house-keeping agency of the Government, although I could understand the budgetary advantages. If some historians resented this transfer and were taken by surprise, their ignorance is a commentary on the failure of the professional historical organizations to keep in touch with archival developments and take an official position on the issue. When I read my paper on "The National Archives and the Historical Profession" (Journal of Southern History, November 1969) at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington in 1966, I sensed that the same ignorance and indifference still prevailed. I never had the feeling that NA was neglecting the archival function for increasing attention to records administration, but it was regrettable that among the enlarged staff of NA there was a decrease in the number of historically trained archivists and that the records administrator was most likely to be a product of the school of "management" rather than of the graduate school of history.

12. Archival reference service. Perhaps my comment in the previous paragraph explains, at least in part, Lyman Butterfield's criticism of NA's reference service in more recent years as compared with the earlier period

when most of its staff were trained historians. However, I have not heard this criticism from other historians; but few of them, I suspect have used NA's records as frequently as Mr. Butterfield.

13. Robert Bahmer as Archivist. Under the circumstances in NA, Bahmer may be regarded as the "logical successor" of Grover; but I am not well enough informed to comment on his brief period as Archivist or on the administration of his successor, Bert Rhoads. I think the recent and current "extension" program of NA, establishing academic contacts and holding conferences in a variety of scholarly fields, is commendable; and the contents of recent issues of Prologue reflect this trend.

14. Presidential Libraries. The concept of the presidential library suggests that the President of the United States has an appreciation of history and an awareness that he is "making history." Certainly both John Adams and Jefferson had that awareness, indicated in their correspondence. FDR was first a naval history buff with some interest also in his genealogy. He could have willed his papers to the Library of Congress, but such a bequest would not have indulged his ego. Whatever his fundamental reason for establishing the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, he set a precedent that has yielded rich fruit for scholarship. Furthermore, the decentralization of these cultural resources, in areas associated with the lives of the chief executives, better

assures long-time preservation in this era of catastrophic destruction and nuclear threats. In most instances the collecting of historical records by these libraries, beyond the presidential papers, has been intelligent and well planned; and the fact that they are under the jurisdiction of the Archivist of the United States has emphasized their public character.

The Truman Library set a new precedent ^{by} beyond the accessibility of its manuscripts and imprints by encouraging scholarly use and reaching out to academic institutions. The Truman Library Institute, with its fellowships, grants-in-aid, and the Library's news-letter on research and publication from the Library's collections, bespeaks this institution as a center of scholarly activity. Here is the perfect merging of archival and historical activity which indirectly strengthens the ties of the National Archives with the world of scholarship and of current affairs in relation to the historical past. It is inevitable that presidential libraries will vary in the quality of their administration, but they have the common purpose of preserving a portion of the American cultural heritage and making it accessible for scholarly use by the qualified layman as well as the professional. And the archivist who directs the library's program should be a trained historian with the scholarly associations that continue to develop it as a center of learning. Having witnessed the operation of the Truman Library

from the inside and seen some of the results of the Institute's program, I regard this Library as the prototype of the presidential library which its sister and future institutions should emulate.

15. National Historical Publications Commission. I have always had great respect for the NHPC and its peculiar contribution to archival and historical scholarship. It is a curious example of a moribund governmental agency brought to life by the initial achievement of a project supported by private enterprise, viz. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Julian P. Boyd, first among scholarly historical editors of this generation, whose Volume I was published in 1950. With the prestige of President Truman, who recommended the initiation of other similar projects for editing the papers of distinguished Americans, the NHPC's A National Program (1954) for promoting such projects, and the inception of Adams and Franklin projects, a new era in historical editing began. The direct and indirect connection of NA with this development has been of great significance in strengthening its relations with the academic community. In the early stages of the program the function of NHPC was almost entirely promotional; it could advise, encourage, and discourage, but it had no leverage for control until the Congress began to make limited appropriations for grants by NHPC. Yet, though none of the early projects began with such grants, the Commission was able to strengthen its position by rendering some reference service in

pertinent records in NA and the Library of Congress and by allocating its funds for grants as judiciously as possible. Through NHPC, NA became better known among professional historians.

A second advantage that accrued to NA came through the caliber of the executive directors of NHPC; Philip M. Hamer and his successor, Oliver W. Holmes. Both were historians by professional training and both came from the staff of NA, dominated by historians during its early years.

Hamer's responsibility was not so much sowing the seeds for the new crop of edited documents as it was nurturing the young plants and encouraging the best kind of cultivation. The "farmers" were independent scholars, their financial support derived mostly from sources other than NHPC; they could profit by advice from Washington but it must not be gratuitous.

Thus Hamer's job required tact and diplomacy and the establishment of personal contacts, oral and written, with the directors of the projects.

It was a case of a historian dealing with historians, understanding common problems of research and projecting them into the field of historical editing.

I had an opportunity to attend a few of the conferences of editors sponsored by NHPC and held in Washington or in conjunction with a historical convention elsewhere. These occasions for discussing common problems and for acquaintanceship among editors met some of their needs and extended the influence of NHPC. Both Hamer and Holmes supplied a modest, personal

touch and thus personified a governmental agency that had valuable aid to give but eschewed the implication of compulsion or the use of subversive influence. Nevertheless they upheld high standards and it has always been my feeling that the grants were made with every effort at equity and fairness. It seems somewhat ironic that in a scholarly program which has won distinction, the elements of promotion and public relations (often tinged with dishonesty and unethical practices in the market) have been indispensable.

The inauguration of a fellowship-apprenticeship program by NHPC several years ago has further strengthened NA's scholarly connections. I can attest to its value to the particular project from experience with the Papers of John Marshall in the Institute of Early American History and Culture. The fellows have been of high caliber, contributing in large measure to the advancement of the project, and the fact that the fellow selects the project of his choice in order of priority works to his advantage and special interest as well as to the project's. In the case of the Marshall Papers, one of the NHPC fellows has become a permanent member of the staff.

It is to be expected that NHPC would meet with some criticism in academic circles. Because these documentary projects are on a large scale for the most part, and therefore of long duration and continuing expense, they have

been challenged as being too comprehensive and edited in too great detail; and some of this criticism has rubbed off onto NHPC. I have always felt that a project of high quality (and most of them can be so classified) deserves continuing support, even if the next generation is required to see it to completion. NHPC's fellowship program buttresses this point of view and exposes the young scholar to historical editing that embraces elements of historical writing and makes him a better historian. This was the basic point of my essay on "A Rationale for Historical Editing Past and Present," in the William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., XXIII, Jan. 1966. The other criticism has come from the "New Left" historians, challenging the NHPC's program of "editing the papers of great white men," by way of parody on "great Americans," among whom women, blacks, and "ethnic" minorities have not been included. These critics begin with the false premise that NHPC selects the papers to be edited, when actually the initiative comes from the project applying for a grant. NHPC must select among applications on the basis of merit in a variety of categories. Given its reputation for fairness, one can only conclude, it seems to me, that the burden of proof is on the discontented scholars to prepare such projects and present them for consideration.

16. Archival training. As I see it, the best archival training includes a generous mixture of "education" in the sense of historical methodology and historical developments by way of illustration. That was how, I believe, Ernst Posner "made a great contribution in this field," as you have pointed out. Although NA expected its employees to be the chief beneficiaries of its training program in terms of specifics, they must have obtained intangible benefits from Dr. Posner's historical and philosophical approach. The fact that the course was open to students outside NA speaks well for the institution as a governmental agency, and the mixture of students must have been mutually advantageous. As historian-archivist Dr. Posner was unique among archivists in the United States. I have always felt that he was over-worked and not greatly appreciated by American University.

17. The archivist as historian. Other factors being equal, the best archivist is the one with professional historical training. If, therefore, he is first a historian and then, by whatever sequence of events, an archivist, he may pursue, hopefully, historical research and writing as time permits, and be a better archivist as a result. I see no reason why he should not do so, as though there were some conflict between the historian's craft and the archivist's. To put it the other way 'round, every historian would profit by an understanding of archival principles and procedure. Not every historian writes history, but I deplore the idea that no archivist should write history

because it is beyond his competence or runs counter to the framework of his professional technique.

18. The Society of American Archivists and NA. As a founding member of the SAA, having attended most of its annual meetings, served on many committees, and held the job of secretary for 8 years, I recall that the image of NA as boogeyman, like the "popish pilot," has persisted from the beginning of the Society. When the SAA began in 1936, the NA staff was undoubtedly the largest "interest group" and it may well be today, but I sensed that NA members of the Society who might have extended their influence often leaned in the opposite direction to counter any accusation of dominance. During most of its existence the American Archivist has been edited in NA, but NA has the best archival library, indispensable to the editorial staff. NA has not dominated any of the offices of SAA and I have not been cognizant of an "NA bloc," although I could write at some length about a "Colorado-Delaware axis" during one dreary period of the Society's history. Requiescat in pace.