

**GUIDE TO THE ARCHIVES
OF THE GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES IN
WASHINGTON**

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Guide to the archives of the government of the United States in Washington by Claude Halstead Van Tyne & Waldo Gifford Leland

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CLAUDE HALSTEAD VAN TYNE & WALDO GIFFORD LELAND

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE guide to the archives of the government at Washington was begun in January, 1903, by Mr. Van Tyne and Mr. Leland, who carried the work forward for some months. In the autumn of that year the task of completing the survey of the archives and of arranging the materials for publication naturally fell to the newly organized Bureau of Historical Research. This task was not completed until the spring of 1904, most of the work being done by Mr. Leland. The character and scope of the volume were somewhat changed and developed while the data were being collected. The purpose at the outset was to gather information as to the whereabouts of important historical materials, to discover how they were preserved and arranged, and to give descriptions of them that would be of service to the historical investigator. As the work proceeded, it was apparent that there could be no hard and fast line between historical collections and ordinary administrative records, and that every branch and division of the Government must be examined with care, even if the report on its manuscript records should ultimately be passed over with scarcely more than a word in the final report. It also became clear that a short history of each bureau or division, and a succinct statement of its duties, methods of work, and mode of keeping its records, would be of service to all students interested in the mechanism of the government or in the growth of its administrative machinery, and would at the same time be the safest guide to those seeking to know where archives of a certain character are likely to be found. As a result, the work has developed into a survey of all the branches, bureaus, and divisions of the federal government in Washington, and includes more than a mere description of their records and collections. The historical data have been gathered and the references to printed authorities and the bibliography have been prepared with care and patience, and it is to be hoped that this feature will appeal to students of history and government.

The book, as we have it here, purports to be only a general survey. Only where materials are of special interest historically is there any effort to give anything approaching detailed information. In some cases it was impossible to get details, in others facts actually gathered seemed not appropriate to the present volume and have

therefore not been printed. The Bureau of Historical Research is continuing the study of the archives, and hopes to make from time to time reports on the portions that have peculiar interest to historical investigators.

A. C. McLAUGHLIN.

*Carnegie Institution of Washington,
August 27, 1904.*

INTRODUCTION.

The compilers of this work were confronted at the outset by a series of problems, in the solution of which they were unaided by anything that might serve as a model. The conditions in Washington are so different from those abroad that English, French, and Italian archive reports served only to suggest certain classes of information that it was desirable to obtain, and were of little service in determining the final form of the *Guide* or in indicating the best methods for gathering the data. Furthermore, there had been no previous attempt to make any general examination of all the records of the Federal Government in Washington, nor indeed had any examination of the records of a single department been attempted, though a few general statements as to certain classes of material to be found in Washington had appeared in print. It is worth while to state at length the difficulties that were encountered in the prosecution of this task, because they not only serve to show the character of the information to be found in the following pages, but also suggest to historical investigators the conditions to be met in any extended investigations of the archives.

In the preliminary preparations for the work it was realized that the material to be examined was widely scattered. There are eighteen or twenty distinct departments, commissions, or other governmental organizations, which are in turn divided into considerably more than a hundred bureaus or offices; many of these are still further divided into divisions or branches. Furthermore the history of many of the departments or bureaus is very complicated, a fact which frequently has a serious effect upon the continuity of their records. Many bureaus have been transferred from one department to another; departments have been reorganized, old bureaus abolished, new ones created, duties redistributed, and methods of business changed, until it has become extremely difficult to account for the location of certain classes of material or to discover the location of others.

Foremost among the bureaus into which each of the great executive departments is divided is the so-called "Secretary's Office", which conducts the business overseen by the secretary in person, and the records of which are the records of the secretary's official acts; sometimes these records are all kept together, sometimes they are divided among the

divisions of the office; sometimes they are scattered throughout the bureaux of the department. Each bureau usually keeps its own records; but while those of one bureau may be found together, those of another are scattered among a dozen divisions. Nor does the dispersion of the records always stop here; in some divisions the files are scattered among subordinate branches and there are almost as many methods as there are file-rooms. In one office, for example, all the letters received from the establishment of the office are to be found in a single unbroken series; in another the letters received are arranged in different series. Perhaps for the first ten years the letters were kept together; then, as their number increased, other series were started; later, again, some of these series were consolidated; and still later possibly the method of keeping all papers, both letters received and copies of letters sent, in a single series was adopted. Thus papers of the same class are filed under varying titles.

The indexing of the records varies also with different file-rooms. In general the indexes make any particular letter or paper easily accessible, but do not aid in finding the papers of any one class or on any particular subject, and hence are of slight service in preparing a general description of the records. The older indexes are of little value for any purpose whatsoever; and the index-books that were in general use until a few years ago are so complicated that their use by the uninitiated is extremely difficult. The system of indexing by means of cards is, however, rapidly coming into use.

Another difficulty encountered was the inconvenient or even inaccessible location of a part of the material. In several offices the earlier records are boxed up and stored in vaults or attics; in others they are hidden behind piles of lumber or large cases. In still other offices, while the records are actually accessible, considerable physical discomfort is attendant upon an examination of them.

The mere mass of these records of the government is well-nigh appalling. It is impossible to form an estimate of the aggregate space occupied by them; in a single office of the Treasury Department, for example, they cover over ten miles of shelving; the volumes of diplomatic and consular correspondence in the State Department are to be numbered by thousands; a few years ago the Adjutant-General reported that in addition to several tons of Confederate records already described there were over ten tons of books and papers, the character of which had not as yet been ascertained. In some departments entire buildings are rented for no other purpose than that of filling

them from cellar to attic with records and files that are not in immediate demand in the prosecution of current work.

Finally the widely varying value of the different classes of records constitutes a problem in itself. From the papers of the Continental Congress or the journals of the Confederate Congress to the correspondence relating to the pay or dismissal of a janitor there is a considerable depreciation in value; in general, however, there may be said to be two classes of files: those that constitute the administrative records, and those that are almost entirely of historical interest and actually exist as completed collections. Of this latter class may be mentioned, for example, the Continental Congress papers, inherited from the old government; the Franklin and Madison papers, acquired by purchase; the archives of the Confederate government, captured upon the fall of the Confederacy; and the collection of Revolutionary orderly books and journals segregated from the administrative records of the Pension Office. The papers of this class are in general readily accessible, are often indexed or catalogued in such a way as to be servicable to the student, and are properly arranged and cared for. Many of these collections are being transferred to the Library of Congress.

The administrative records comprise the files relating to the actual administration of the government and consist largely of correspondence, accounts, reports, and similar papers. To this class belong the diplomatic and consular correspondence, the correspondence of the Navy Department with officers of the Navy, military reports of army officers, and other material of the greatest value, along with tons of adjusted accounts and thousands of file-boxes filled with letters relating to the most unimportant details of routine business. Furthermore, in almost any series of volumes the worthless letters far exceed in number those having historical importance.

With these conditions confronting the compilers, they realized that any inventory, anything approaching a complete catalogue, was out of the question, and they resolved to prepare a guide that should show in what office or department any particular class of material is to be found, and that should describe, though in the most general terms, the material actually there. They attempted to ascertain, in the case of any one office or division, the different classes of material on file, their general character and probable value, the dates of the earliest files, and the extent of the records as a whole. In some cases more than this was possible; in others, less; while in a few instances the material was of so little value that they felt justified in omitting