

# The Struggle to Establish a National Archives in the United States

By Donald R. McCoy

From the beginning of the Republic, there was concern for preserving its records. The secretary of the Continental Congress, Charles Thomson, labored during his fifteen years of service to record the infant government's business for posterity. Ebenezer Hazard sought and received from Congress in 1778 funds to collect state papers in order to document the history of the United States. If only to facilitate the government's work, various federal administrators and clerks followed up these promising beginnings by caring for their records as the capital moved from one town to another during the 1780s and 1790s.<sup>1</sup>

The United States in 1800 was not greatly different from most European countries in safekeeping the records of the national government. But change was in the air. Some German principalities had already begun establishing the forerunners of archives, and France during the 1790s was developing its pioneering Archives Nationales. During the nineteenth century most European countries would establish national archival institutions, and French, German, and Dutch archivists would develop an impressive body of archival theory and practice. The United States was, however, left at the starting gate. The development of European archival agencies

and the establishment of history as a research discipline had negligible influence on how the government of the United States cared for its records. True, some Americans took note of developments abroad, and many were alarmed by the parlous state of their nation's older records. However, while some improvements in records preservation and management were achieved randomly on the state and local levels, no significant changes were effected at the national level.<sup>2</sup>

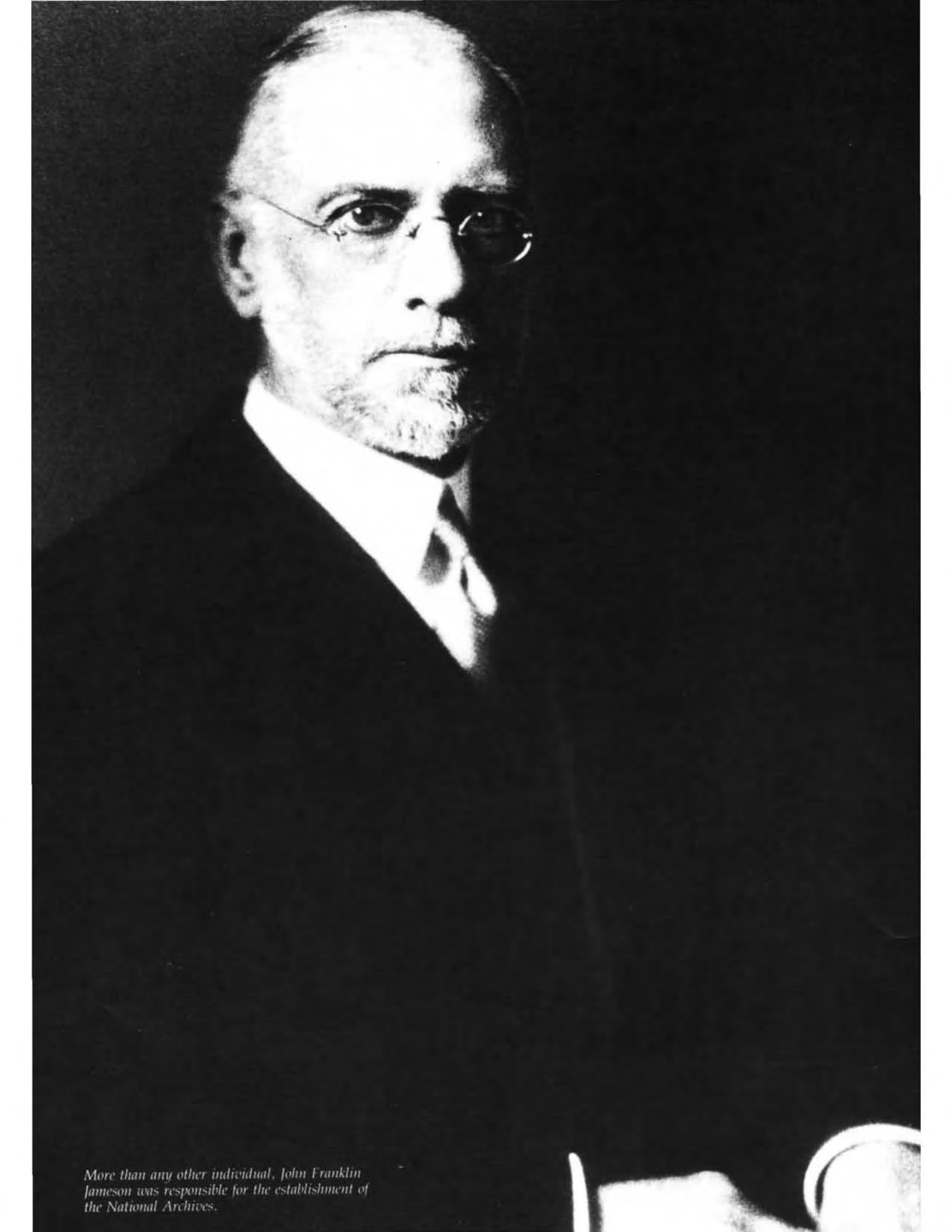
As the government of the United States grew, the attention given to its records became a more serious issue. It was inevitable that disaster would strike. In 1800 and 1801 fire seriously damaged the records of the Departments of War and the Treasury. These were only the first two of many fires that jeopardized the government's records over the years. According to J. Franklin Jameson, 254 fires occurred in federal offices between 1833 and 1915. Fire was only the most dramatic and visible threat to the safety of the federal government's records. Chemicals, extreme cold or heat, water, mold, insects, animals, and theft were among the others that took their toll. Moreover, negligence in arranging and storing records had its impact as many documents became impossible to find.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Hamer Kegan, "A Becoming Regard to Posterity," *American Archivist* 40 (Jan. 1977): 6-8; Carl L. Lokke, "The Continental Congress papers: their history, 1789-1952," *National Archives Accessions* No. 51 (June 1954): 1-3; Buford Rowland, "Recordkeeping practices of the House of Representatives," *ibid.* No. 53 (Jan. 1957): 1-2; and Harold T. Pinkett, "New York as the Temporary National Capital, 1785-1790: The Archival Heritage," *ibid.* No. 60 (Dec. 1967): 1-11.

<sup>2</sup>Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution" and "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in Ken Munden, ed., *Archives & The Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (1967), pp. 25-26, 36-44; Maynard Brichford, "The Origins of Modern European Archival Theory," *Midwestern Archivist* 7 (No. 2, 1982): 87-98; and G. Philip Bauer, "Public Archives in the United States," in William B. Hesseltine and Donald R. McNeil, eds., *In Support of Clio: Essays in Memory of Herbert A. Kellar* (1958), pp. 49-65.

<sup>3</sup>Bauer, "Public Archives," p. 61; and Victor Gondos, Jr., *J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives, 1906-1926* (1981), p. 3 and *passim*.



*More than any other individual, John Franklin Jameson was responsible for the establishment of the National Archives.*

In spite of this neglect, there was always some concern for preserving federal records. Many government officials tried conscientiously, often under discouraging circumstances, to safeguard the documents entrusted to them. In 1810 Congress created a committee to investigate the state of the government's "records and archives." This committee's work led to legislation authorizing the construction of fireproof rooms to hold key federal records. This was offset in 1814, however, by the burning of public buildings in Washington by the British during their occupation. Although these buildings were rebuilt by 1820, they proved to be too small for the continuing expansion of governmental activities, and Congress proved to be slow in authorizing new buildings. Moreover, new buildings, even with some fireproof rooms, did not constitute archival repositories. Congress occasionally responded to problems regarding the older state papers by authorizing the publication of documentary series, following the example of Ebenezer Hazard. This led to the appearance of the Gales & Seaton edition of *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive* and Peter Force's *American Archives . . . a Documentary History of . . . the North American Colonies*. As important as these and other published series were,

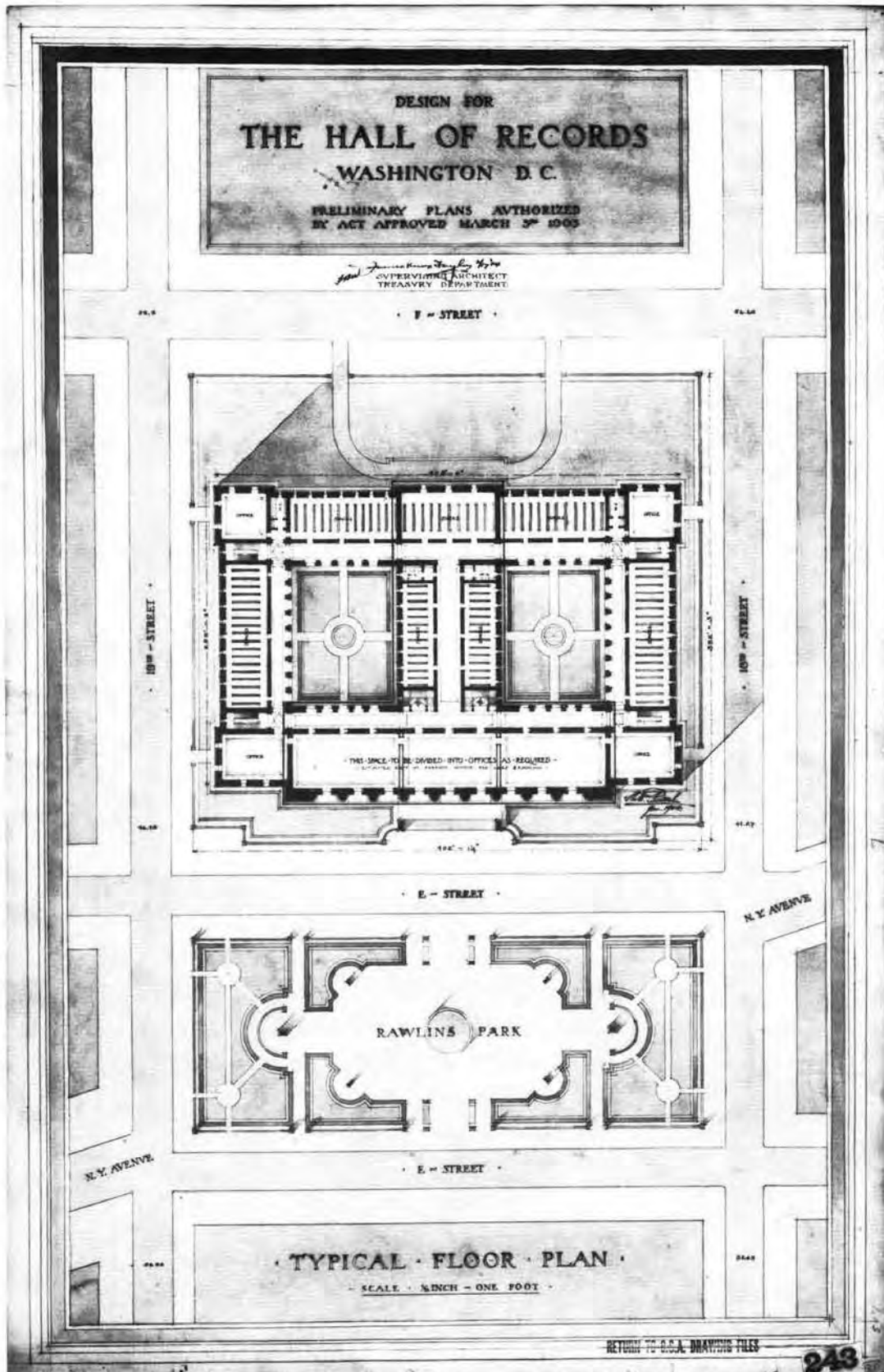
they did not satisfy the need to preserve either the original documents or the far larger number of significant records that remained unpublished.<sup>4</sup>

The situation for federal records worsened after the start of the Civil War. The size of the government and the number of records on hand grew greatly during the war. After the war, the size of neither the government nor its records shrank to its prewar dimensions. In fact, between 1861 and 1916 the federal government's accumulation of records mounted from 108,000 to 1,031,000 cubic feet. This growth, together with the often alarming conditions under which the older records were kept, led eventually to fresh ideas as to how federal records should be handled. By the 1870s federal officials were suggesting that they be authorized to destroy "useless papers." Finally, in 1889, legislation was enacted allowing agencies annually to submit to Congress, for its approval, lists of records recommended for disposal. This program was used so cautiously, however, that it did not prove to be significant until after the establishment of the

<sup>4</sup>Lokke, "Continental Congress papers," pp. 3-5; Rowland, "Recordkeeping practices," pp. 2-4; Bauer, "Public Archives," pp. 62-63; and Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 4-6.

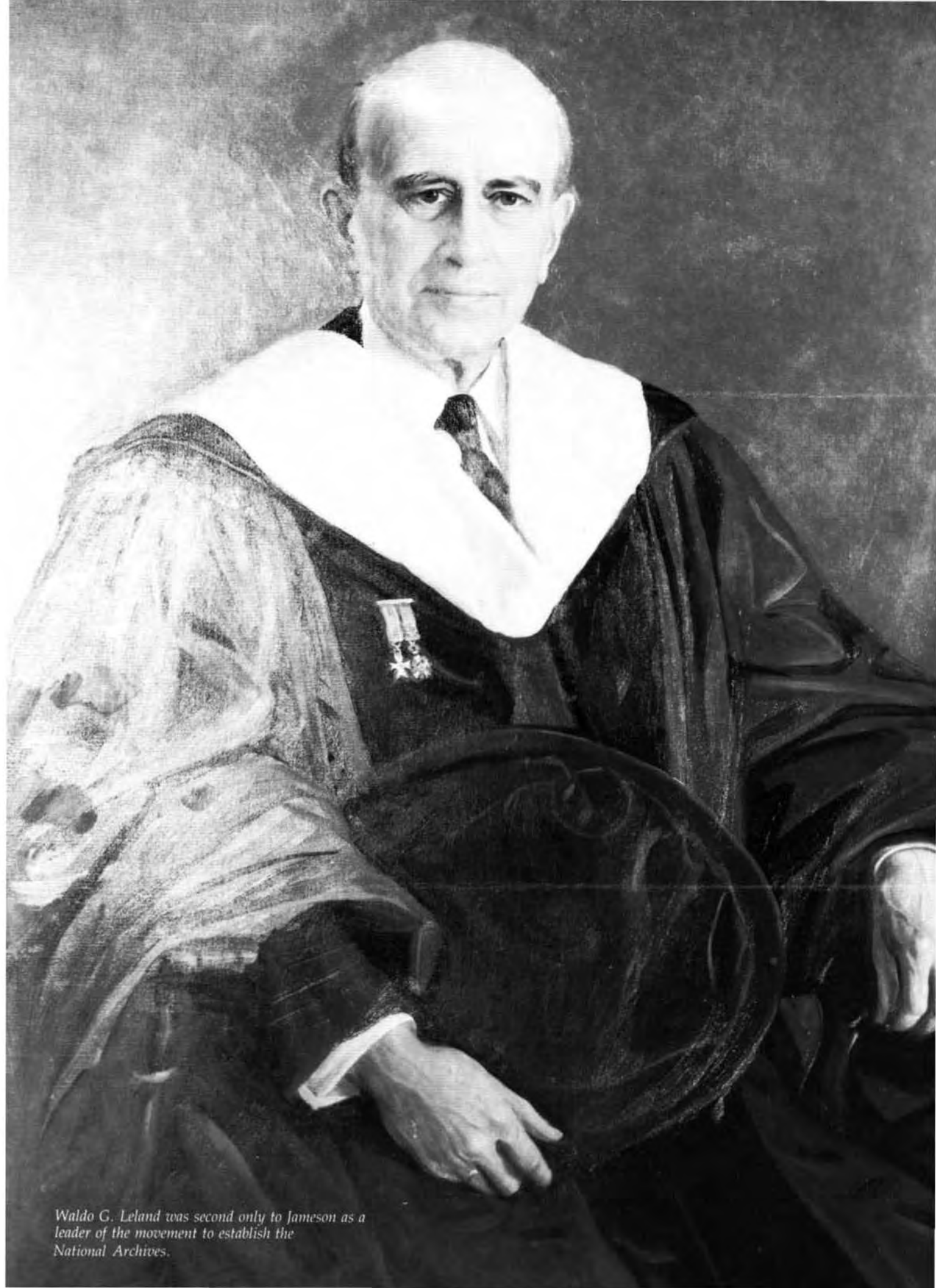


Many federal agencies were negligent in caring for their records before the establishment of the National Archives.



Among the many early designs for an archives building was this one by Theodore W. Tietsch. The open courtyards were to be filled in as more space was needed for records.





*Waldo G. Leland was second only to Jameson as a leader of the movement to establish the National Archives.*

National Archives.<sup>5</sup>

Among the most captivating and promising of the new ideas were the proposals to build a hall of records in Washington. The threat of fire was the most powerful factor in spurring consideration of such a structure. After a large fire in the Interior Department Building in 1877, interest grew in constructing a fireproof building in which federal agencies could store, but still separately control, their older records. Legislation was repeatedly introduced thereafter regarding a hall of records, but Congress did not act until 1896. At that time Congress directed the secretary of the treasury to supply plans for such a structure. In 1898 Treasury Secretary Lyman J. Gage recommended a building that would have a maximum capacity of four million cubic feet and cost \$1.2 million. Five years passed before Congress appropriated funds to buy a site for this hall of records, and the purchase was made in 1904. Although it seemed that a hall of records was on its way to becoming a reality, what followed was not construction on the purchased site, but obstruction and more discussion on Capitol Hill.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, new voices were being heard, and a new idea—that a national archives be established—was soon broached.

Scholars had been interested in official records since the beginning of the Republic, as witnessed by Ebenezer Hazard's efforts to publish state papers. Private researchers had sought from time to time to use the federal government's records. Indeed, Francis Lieber's *Encyclopedia Americana* of 1829 indicated that "The archives of the U. States are easily accessible, and proper recommendation will open them to anyone who wants to use them for scientific purposes." The records apparently became more difficult to use, however, as the government became larger and more complicated. Yet not until late in the nineteenth century would enough private citizens be interested in using federal records for access to them to become an issue. By then not only had the nation's scholarly concerns substantially increased, but the professionalization of historians had begun to take place, as signified by the founding of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1884.<sup>7</sup>

It did not take long for the AHA to demonstrate its interest in the older records of the fed-

eral government. In 1893 Ellen Hardin Walworth read a paper at the AHA convention on the contribution of federal archives to the nation's progress. She indicated, however, that she was appalled by the condition of the older records in the custody of the Department of State. In the ensuing discussion William F. Poole, a historian in attendance, criticized the cavalier attitudes of the State Department toward the records and the concerns of researchers. A departmental spokesman refuted much of this criticism at the 1894 convention of the AHA. Yet although the State Department shared many of the concerns of scholars for the archives, there was little it could do about them. The department's problem was alleviated by legislation in 1903 authorizing federal agencies to transfer to the Library of Congress "any books, maps, or other material" not required in the conduct of current business. As a consequence of this legislation, the Library of Congress acquired some highly significant federal archives, most notably a major portion of the records of the Continental Congress.<sup>8</sup>

The interest of the AHA in the archives of the federal government was to be long lasting. In 1895 Professor J. Franklin Jameson of Brown University urged the association to act to promote the preservation of source materials relating to American history. The AHA responded by establishing the Historical Manuscripts Commission, with Jameson as chairman. By 1899 the AHA recognized that separate attention had to be given to official records, and it thus established the Public Archives Commission. The work of this commission led to published surveys of state archives and, upon Jameson's initiative, to the publication in 1904 of Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland's *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington*. This ground-breaking volume, among other things, spurred the interest of scholars in the provision of better care for federal archives. The work of the Public Archives Commission had already led, in 1901, to the AHA's endorsement of the idea of building a hall of records in Washington. The commission also encouraged the professionalization of American archivists, especially through the creation within the AHA in 1909 of the annual Conference of Archivists.<sup>9</sup>

J. Franklin Jameson was the spearhead of all this activity, as well as of the movement to es-

<sup>5</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 6–10; and Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934–1968* (1978), passim.

<sup>6</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 7–10, 15–16; and Mabel E. Deutrich, "The Hall of Records Period of Archive Administration," manuscript (1950), pp. 1–7.

<sup>7</sup>Lokke, "Continental Congress papers," pp. 5–11.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 12–18.

<sup>9</sup>H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation: Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (1969), pp. 6–7; Bauer, "Public Archives," pp. 65–66; and Ernst Posner, "Archival Administration in the United States," in Munden, ed., *Archives & The Public Interest*, pp. 116–117.

establish a national archives in the United States. This seemed almost foreordained. In 1882 Jameson had received one of the first two doctoral degrees in history granted by an American university. He then pursued a notably successful career as a teacher and a researcher at Johns Hopkins, Brown, and Chicago universities, and in 1895 he became the founding editor of the *American Historical Review*. For the rest of his life, in many different roles, his voice would be heard in the governing councils of the AHA. Moreover, from 1905 to 1928 Jameson directed the Bureau of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution, and from 1928 until his death in 1937 he headed the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. It was from these two bases in Washington that he led the campaign for establishing a national archives.<sup>10</sup>

When Jameson arrived in Washington in 1905, he had not yet focused his attention on a national archives as the prime way of dealing with the older records of the federal government. Indeed the idea was raised first in Congress as a result of the efforts of someone who came from neither academic nor official circles. This was a printer and genealogist, Lothrop Withington of Massachusetts, who had been impressed by the operations of England's Public Record Office (PRO). Withington drafted a bill that would establish an American equivalent of the PRO, and he persuaded the scholarly senator from his home state, Henry Cabot Lodge, to introduce it in the Senate in 1906. Among other things, the bill would have created a powerful board of record commissioners. This board would have had legal custody of older federal records and superintendence of a record office located in an appropriately designed building that would have served as a national archival institution.<sup>11</sup>

Withington's bill never reached the floor of the Senate. It initiated consideration of a different approach than a hall of records to caring for the government's older records. Action and organization were not long in coming to the support of the concept of establishing a national archives in the United States. In 1907 a second edition, revised and enlarged by Waldo G. Leland, of the Van Tyne and Leland *Guide* appeared. Leland was to become a leader in the

<sup>10</sup>Fred Shelley, "The Interest of J. Franklin Jameson in the National Archives: 1908-1934," *American Archivist* 12 (Apr. 1949): 99-130; Elizabeth Donnan and Leo F. Stock, eds., *An Historian's World: Selections from the Correspondence of John Franklin Jameson* (1956), passim; and Ruth Anna Fisher and William Lloyd Fox, eds., *J. Franklin Jameson: A Tribute* (1965), passim.

<sup>11</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 14-18; and Deutrich, "Hall of Records Period," pp. 11-13.



President Theodore Roosevelt supported the campaign to establish the National Archives.



national archives movement second only in importance to his chief at the Carnegie Institution, Jameson. Historians already recognized Leland as an outstanding authority on archives, and he began to act the role. In 1907 he spoke in Washington on the need to provide decent housing for federal archives. This was the public beginning of Jameson and Leland's strenuous and coordinated efforts to secure the creation of a national archives. In this movement Leland became the outstanding archival theoretician, while Jameson became the coordinator and chief lobbyist.<sup>12</sup>

In 1907 Jameson sought President Theodore Roosevelt's support for the construction of a national archives. The president-historian agreed with Jameson with respect to the desirability of such a building, but he was not optimistic that it could soon be achieved. Jameson agreed that this was probably a realistic assessment and indicated that he would nevertheless begin talking with members of Congress about a national archives. Moreover, Jameson got Roosevelt to solicit information from federal agency heads on their anticipated space needs in an archives building. This marked the first of many instances of cooperation between scholars and officials toward the establishment of a national archives. The reactions of the agency spokesmen varied, but their responses demonstrated that most of them were concerned about their records situation. It is also worth noting that Herbert Putnam, the librarian of Congress, removed his institution from consideration for becoming the national archives because of his keen awareness of the different functions of libraries and archives. Indeed Putnam was a strong supporter of Jameson in the national archives movement, and he would remain so until victory was achieved.<sup>13</sup>

One problem during the first decade of this century was that many officials—and even historians—did not distinguish between a hall of records and an archives. One can hardly blame them, for Jameson had only just begun consistently to call his heart's desire a "National Archive." Plainly, Jameson had a lot of work to do in order to show the desirability of an archives, an institution devoted to preserving and administering records of enduring value for every-

body's benefit, over a hall of records which would only provide safe storage for records that would remain under the control of the originating agencies. This confusion led him, in 1908, to persuade the AHA to establish a Committee on the National Archives. Over the years, Jameson was able to use this committee effectively to educate federal officials to the need for a national archives and to generate scholarly and public support for its creation. He was also able to use his position with the Carnegie Institution and his various positions in the AHA to good effect. Moreover, Leland, as Jameson's lieutenant within both the Carnegie Institution and the AHA, supplied able support in this struggle. They made clear that they had purposes in mind beyond establishing a national archives. As Leland told the AHA's first Conference of Archivists in 1909, their goal was no less than to lay the basis for "an archive economy, sound in principle, and in practice adapted to American conditions, in conformity to which all our public archives, federal, State, county, municipal, and town, and perhaps even our private archives shall in time come to be administered."<sup>14</sup>

By December 1910, largely as a result of Jameson and Leland's work, the AHA went on record in support of the establishment of a national archives instead of a hall of records and adopted a resolution petitioning Congress to build in Washington a "national archive depository, where the records of the Government may be concentrated, properly cared for, and preserved." Taking advantage of a fire in the Geological Survey, Jameson approached President William Howard Taft in September 1910, asking him to recommend to Congress the establishment of a national archives. Taft showed polite interest in the matter, but no more at that time. It was not until February 1912 that Jameson's efforts showed results, when the president raised the need for a national archives with Congress. Indeed, Taft went further that year. In July he directed agency heads to obtain information on the older records in their field offices, and in December he pointed out to Congress that it had not moved toward authorizing a "badly needed . . . Hall of Archives."<sup>15</sup>

Jameson had also worked since 1909 to influence Congress. By 1911 he decided that it was time to act boldly. Then, in February, he arranged for Senator Lodge and Representative George P. Lawrence, of Massachusetts, to pres-

<sup>12</sup>Rodney A. Ross, "Waldo Gifford Leland: Archivist by Association," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 266–267; Waldo Gifford Leland, "Archival Principles: Selections From the Writings of Waldo Gifford Leland," National Archives, *Staff Information Papers* No. 20 (Mar. 1955): 1–13; and Posner, "Archival Administration in the United States," pp. 117–118.

<sup>13</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 19–21.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 21–25; and Ross, "Waldo Gifford Leland," pp. 267–268.

<sup>15</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 26–29, 55–58.



AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
500 BOND BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

At the annual meeting of the American Historical Association held at Buffalo, December 29, the following resolution was unanimously adopted.

RESOLVED,

That the American Historical Association has seen with satisfaction the introduction in the House of Representatives, by the Hon. Morris Sheppard, Chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, of a bill (H. R. 11850) intended to take the preliminary steps to the establishment of a central depository for the national archives, and urges upon Congress the passage of this or some other bill having the same object in view.

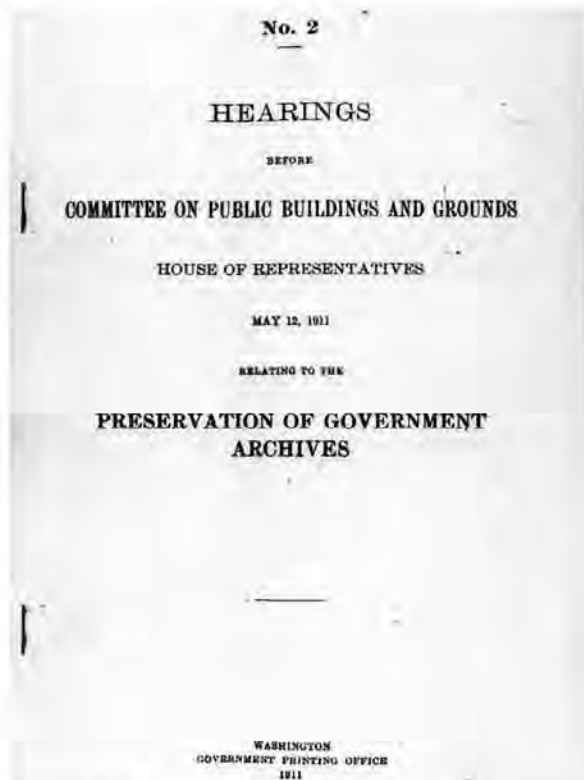
That the Secretary of the Association is instructed to send a copy of this resolution to the President of the United States, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of representatives, and the chairmen of the Committees on Public Buildings and Grounds of the Senate and House.

A true copy



Secretary.

*By December 1910, largely as a result of Jameson and Leland's work, the American Historical Association went on record in support of a bill to establish the National Archives.*



*Pressed by Jameson and others, Congress held hearings on the archives bill.*

ent the AHA's 1910 resolution and an explanatory memorial to the Senate and the House. The memorial argued that the valuable older records of the government were not only uneconomically administered, but were also largely useless and at risk of being lost because they were stored in scattered, crowded, and unsafe locations. The remedy, according to the memorial,

as in other countries, is the erection of a suitable building, where government records can be filed in an orderly and systematic way, in safety, with guides for convenient use, a treasure to both the administrator and historian and "a national archive commensurate with the greatness of the country and the importance of its history."

Jameson arranged for *The Nation* and the *New York Evening Post* to supply editorial support for his first campaign to win congressional favor. Moreover, a disaster soon occurred to underscore the importance of his work. This was the fire of March 29, 1911, in the State House in Albany that destroyed much of the archival treasure of New York State.<sup>16</sup>

It was also in 1911 that Jameson secured two long-term congressional allies, Representative Morris Sheppard of Texas and Senator Miles

Poindexter of Washington. On June 19 Shepard introduced a bill, based on a draft by Jameson, that would authorize the secretary of the treasury to devise designs and estimates for a federal archives building containing ultimately four million cubic feet of space. Jameson had smoothed the way for the introduction of Shepard's bill by securing preliminary hearings before the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds; he saw to it that the bill's introduction was followed up by a small barrage of news stories, editorials, and communications with members of Congress. Aply supported by Leland and several other leading archivists and historians, Jameson had proved himself to be tireless and ingenious in opening his campaign for congressional authorization of a national archives building.<sup>17</sup>

During 1912 Jameson's campaign proceeded at a fever pitch. He made vigorous efforts to enlist the support of patriotic societies (especially the Daughters of the American Revolution), historical societies, newspapers, and magazines. His missionary work among members of Congress continued, as did his efforts to expand his support from executive officials, historians, archivists, and librarians. At this time, two ominous signs appeared. Jameson indicated one in his comment to the editor of the *Washington Times* in which he described his work as a "push for a National Archive Building" as against the considerable interest on Capitol Hill in "a lot of little post-offices in local districts." The second was that in talking with members of Congress it became clear that the location might be a stumbling block. That question had, after all, contributed to stymieing the movement for a hall of records.<sup>18</sup>

Jameson and his allies were undeterred by these two issues in 1912. They were clearly making progress, as sentiment rose in the House and the Senate to authorize the erection of a national archives building. In February Senator Poindexter introduced his archives bill, which basically paralleled Congressman Sheppard's bill in the House. Publicity mounted in support of a national archives building. There were, most notably, Rosa Pendleton Chiles' stirring article in the *Review of Reviews* on the alarming state of the nation's older records and Waldo G. Leland's article in the *American Historical Review* on what should be done to preserve and administer the federal archives properly. Jameson would use reprints of these articles effectively in educating both Congress and his constituencies to

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 29-32, 26.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 32-38.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 41-46, 55.

the need for a national archives constructed and administered along the most modern lines. In March Jameson and company out did themselves in presenting testimony before the Senate Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. The administrative and scholarly benefits of archives were outlined in detail. The witnesses also discussed at length—and often vividly—the state of the records, the unnecessary costs incurred by current practices, and the most effective, efficient, and economical ways in which they could be safeguarded and administered in the national interest in an archives building staffed by well-trained specialists. These factors emphasized the need for the construction of a well-appointed national archives building that would be much more than a mere hall of records or, as Lothrop Withington told the committee, a “departmental junk shop.”<sup>19</sup>

President Taft’s request for congressional action on an archives building in December 1912 was well-timed for the grand finale of Jameson’s legislative campaign during the Sixty-second Congress. Jameson had to work fast to take advantage of Taft’s support, for the president had lost his bid for reelection, and a new administration and a Democratic Congress were scheduled to take office in March 1913. The supporters of a national archives bombarded the lame duck session of Congress with reminders of the wisdom of their cause. The result was success in the form of omnibus legislation that included authorization for planning a federal archives building with a capacity of three million cubic feet, expandable to 8.9 million cubic feet. The measure also provided for the inspection of the leading archives buildings in Europe before completion of the plans and authorized \$5,000 for drawing up preliminary plans. On March 4, 1913, in the final act of his administration, President Taft signed the omnibus bill into law. Little did Jameson and his allies know then that thirteen years later they would still be fighting for appropriations for a national archives building.<sup>20</sup>

Jameson did know, however, that there were several steps remaining before he could realize his dream of a national archives building. Of immediate importance was securing appropriation of the \$5,000 authorized for the preliminary plans. Again Jameson marshalled his arguments and forces for legislative combat.

Success seemed to be his in August 1914, when his old classmate at Johns Hopkins, Woodrow Wilson, signed the necessary appropriation bill. A catch developed, though. The Department of the Treasury ruled that the \$5,000 was insufficient for the preparation of the preliminary plans, which was a way of pointing up that the champions of an archives building had failed to touch base with the new supervising architect at the Treasury. There was also a second catch, for the outbreak of World War I in 1914 indefinitely postponed the required inspection of the leading European archives buildings. The first problem was solved in 1915 when a change in office allowed a more sympathetic Treasury official to proceed with drawing up the preliminary plans. The second problem required legislation, however, to eliminate the requirement for an inspection of European archives buildings. Once more Jameson rallied his forces; once more the case for a national archives had to be recited on Capitol Hill. Finally, in June 1916, Congress enacted legislation deleting the European inspection requirement. Jameson had to remind himself and his allies that Francis Bacon’s idea of 1616 for an English archives did not come to fruition until the Public Record Office was built 240 years later.<sup>21</sup>

The champions of a national archives in the United States did not have to wait 240 years, but they had to endure considerable frustration before success was theirs. After the election of 1916, Jameson sought to enlist Woodrow Wilson’s assistance. He asked the president to recommend to Congress an appropriation for a site for the archives building since the preliminary plans were ready and the European inspection requirement had been eliminated. Wilson did not believe, however, that a lame duck session of Congress was the right time for such action. American involvement in World War I subsequently precluded his consideration of such a recommendation in 1917 and 1918. Although disappointed, Jameson sought other avenues to forward his crusade. Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo and Senator Poindexter pressed legislation in 1917 to authorize McAdoo to contract for the archives structure. Moreover, in December the Public Buildings Commission urged the erection of the building. Nor was the movement for a national archives lacking in other support. The inundation of the government in records of its own making during the war caused serious concern among responsible federal officials and various historical, patriotic, and genealogical organiza-

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 41–55; Rosa P. Chiles, “The National Archives: Are They in Peril?” *Review of Reviews* 45 (Feb. 1912): 209–213; and Waldo Gifford Leland, “The National Archives: A Programme,” *American Historical Review* 18 (Oct. 1912): 5–25.

<sup>20</sup>Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 60–62.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 62–76.





*Eben Putnam, national historian of the American Legion, was instrumental in placing the veterans group in the ranks of the archives movement. Courtesy: American Legion.*

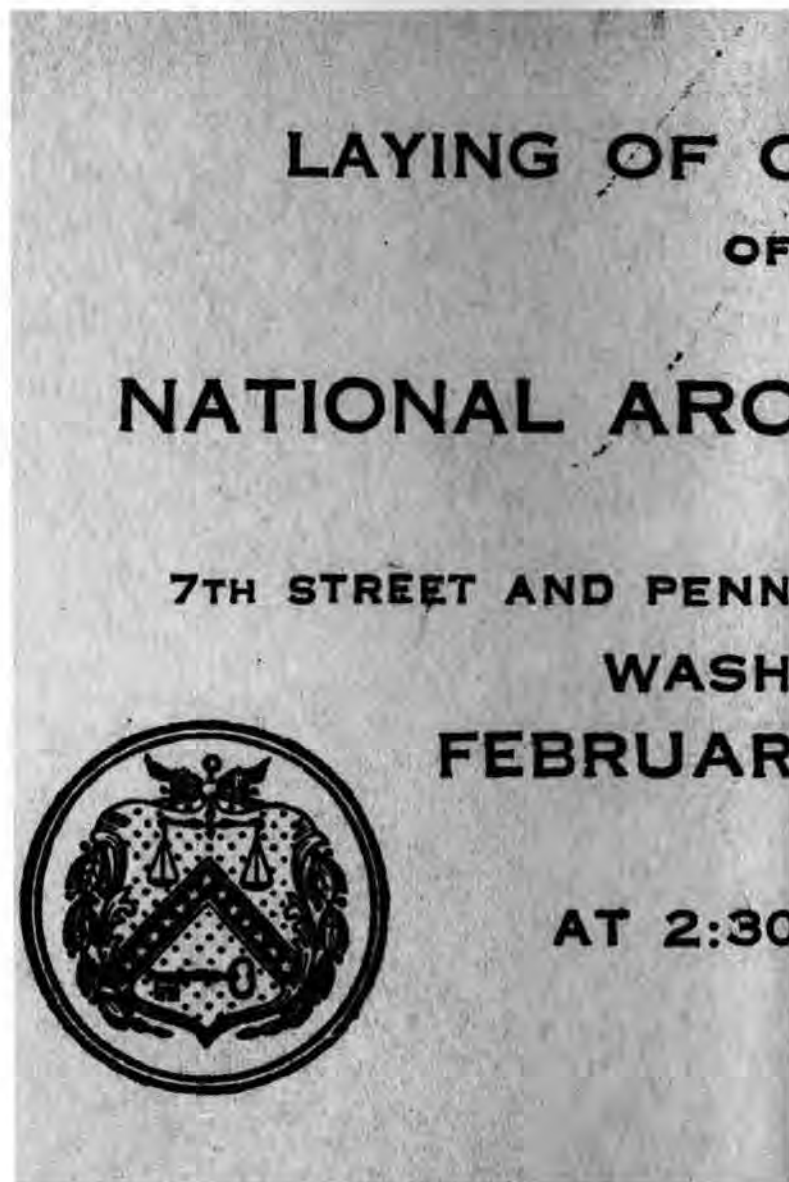
tions, including the Daughters of the American Revolution and the National Genealogical Society. Despite this, neither the president nor the Congress was willing to act on the building of a national archives during Wilson's second term.<sup>22</sup>

The 1920s opened with a fire that dramatized the need for a national archives building. This fire, on January 10, 1921, destroyed the census records of 1890 and other valuable materials in the Commerce Department Building. This was the prelude to Jameson's offensive to win the support of the incoming Republican administration of Warren G. Harding for a national archives. The fire at least added the new secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover, to the ranks of the archives movement. It also generated some extra public pressure on Congress. As the *Washington Post* pointed out, so far it seemed that Congress was "wedded to the theory 'Happy is the country that has no history.'" In working on Capitol Hill in 1921, Jameson and his allies again had to deal with diversionary questions. Could not federal records be stored in existing space (despite the fact that any available space was unsatisfactory)? Would not the cost of an archives building be exorbitant (despite the fact that the current ways of handling records were grossly uneconomical and inefficient)? There was also confusion in congressional debate as to what steps had been taken earlier in authorizing the archives building. Then came disagreements about sites for the building, as well as opposition from those members of Congress who wanted other authorized buildings funded first. The upshot was that although the Senate approved a site for the archives building, the House failed to act.<sup>23</sup>

There was, however, one highly encouraging development in 1921, and that was the support of the American Legion for a national archives. Eben Putnam, the national historian of this new and large organization of veterans, was instrumental in placing the American Legion in the ranks of the archives movement. Now Jameson would have not only mass support, but also, in Putnam, an astute tactician. Nevertheless, the archives movement still had a long way to travel before it would enjoy victory. The bastions of congressional opposition would not be easily stormed even with the support of the doughboys of World War I. This was evident in 1922 as the Senate again acted favorably on a site for the archives building, and the House again refused to agree with the upper chamber. In short, the national archives was losing out in the strug-

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 77-91, 125.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 92-101.



*President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone for the new Archives be one of the most beautiful buildings in America, an expression*

gle between the administration and the House of Representatives as to whether new federal buildings should be constructed only in the capital or all over the country.<sup>24</sup>

If progress was being made toward the establishment of a national archives, it was barely perceptible. Senator Reed Smoot of Utah sought to break the impasse early in 1923 when he offered legislation to convert the Pension Office Building into a federal archives. This only resulted in a waste of time as Jameson and his allies felt constrained to convince Congress that this attractive old building was unsafe for storing the government's records. The Senate obligingly

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 104-131.

NER STONE

ES BUILDING

ANIA AVENUE, N.W.

ON

O, 1933

LOCK

ADMIT ONE

*building, predicting that "This temple of our history will appropriately of the American soul."*

agreed with both sides, passing both Smoot's amendment and Poindexter's proposal to appropriate funds to start construction of a national archives building. Miles Poindexter, who was in his last days in Congress, was not to see his long interest in an archives capped with success. A House-Senate conference committee struck out both his and Smoot's proposals. Members of the House were intent upon blocking new construction in Washington until appropriations were made for federal buildings outside the capital. Jameson seemed to have abundant reason for his fear that a national archives structure "will now have to take its chances with a raft of public buildings, so large and loosely

constructed that it will sink."<sup>25</sup>

Upon the death of Warren G. Harding in August 1923, a new president took office. This chief executive, Calvin Coolidge, responded positively and quickly to his cabinet's advice that proper housing had to be provided for federal agencies in Washington. He was also concerned for the safety of the government's older records. In December Coolidge recommended to Congress that it appropriate \$5 million annually for several years in support of the orderly development of federal buildings in the capital. Soon bills were introduced in the Senate and the House to implement the president's request. But it became clear that the House would not budge on its position that there had to be a gigantic public building program across the nation. And why not? As many House leaders pointed out, this program had been authorized in 1913. They renewed their vows that building needs in Washington would not be met until the promises of federal buildings in congressional districts had been fulfilled. Jameson became so discouraged by the impasse on the federal buildings issue that in 1924 he sought private funding for a national archives, though without success. He and other champions of an archives building would just have to wait to see what would happen as a result of the jousting between the administration and the House.<sup>26</sup>

By 1926 the administration was so worn down by the interminable battle with the House over a public buildings program that agreement was in the offing. Jameson feared that in the rush of various agencies to climb aboard the legislative "raft of public buildings" the national archives would be left behind. As it turned out, there was space on the raft for an archives building, and the raft did not sink as he had in 1923 anticipated that it would. The public buildings bill was ably steered through Congress, and there was something in the resulting authorization for everybody, including the proponents of a national archives building. President Coolidge signed the bill into law on May 25, 1926. By July Congress had passed appropriations for public buildings, including one million dollars "Toward the construction of an extensible archives building and the acquisition of a site." Moreover, the secretary of the treasury was authorized "to enter into contracts for the entire estimated cost of such building, including stacks, and site, for not to exceed \$6,900,000." At last the long struggle was over. The United States was to have a national archives building. It was

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 132-149.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 152-159.



purely fortuitous that this action was taken during the sesquicentennial year of the birth of the Republic.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, having an appropriation was not the same as having a building. A site had to be selected and purchased; detailed plans had to be drawn up for the building; and additional congressional appropriations had to be secured. But there would be no more crises or serious delays in forwarding the construction of the National Archives Building. The Treasury Department's arrangements had advanced so far by 1930 that an architect could be engaged. John

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 160–169

Russell Pope, one of America's most outstanding architects, was selected. Pope designed the building in a grand style, intending that it would be "one of the most interesting and most important monuments in our great Washington plan." There is no doubt that the National Archives Building became that, as well as the most advanced archival structure built to that point anywhere in the world. The ground was broken for the monumental edifice, which was situated between Seventh and Ninth streets, NW, on the east and west and Constitution and Pennsylvania avenues on the south and north, in September 1931. In December 1932 the government



*Engraved on the pedestal of an impressive stone statue at the front of the National Archives building, these words underscore the*

contracted with the George A. Fuller Company to build the structure. President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone in February 1933, predicting that "This temple of our history will appropriately be one of the most beautiful buildings in America—an expression of the American soul."<sup>28</sup>

The National Archives Building was not ready for occupancy until November 1935, and it would not be considered finished until 1938. Outfitting and adjustments continued for three more years. The total cost of the structure was \$12,250,794. No one complained, however, that the United

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 167–174; and McCoy, *The National Archives*, pp. 31, 6–7.

States did not get its money's worth, functionally or esthetically.<sup>29</sup>

Yet the building, however well planned and constructed, was no more than a shell for a national archives. Although Jameson, Leland, and others had provided a great deal of theory as to what would occupy the structure, Jameson had intentionally avoided seeking organizational legislation during the long years of the struggle for a national archives building. Questions of the organization and powers of a national archives, as he saw them, would only have complicated the problems involved in securing the building. Certainly, too, the crucial year of the Great Depression, 1933, was no time to lay down the rules and structure for the operation of the federal archival agency. That could safely wait until 1934. Although the historical establishment and several federal officials and legislators had divergent ideas for the new agency, matters moved relatively smoothly that year toward agreement on national archives legislation. No small credit for this expedience goes to the interest of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a long-time history buff, in getting "action taken on it right away." The action in Congress revolved around bills introduced in March by Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee and in April by Representative Sol Bloom of New York. The Senate and the House ironed out the differences in the two bills by June 16. Three days later, on June 19, 1934, Roosevelt signed the resulting National Archives Act into law. In brief, the measure established the National Archives as an executive agency responsible to the president. The new agency was to be headed by the Archivist of the United States, who, in conjunction with the National Archives Council, was given broad authority to preserve and care for the archives of the federal government.<sup>30</sup>

J. Franklin Jameson, Waldo G. Leland, and most of their allies had lived to see not only the construction of the National Archives Building, but also the establishment of an agency, the National Archives, that would quickly take its place as an internationally outstanding archives. It had been a long and tortuous struggle, and there would be more struggles to come in developing the new agency. No one involved in the movement for a national archives, however, questioned in 1934 or later that it had all been worth while. Why should they? After all, they all well knew that the past was prologue, in this case, to a significant ending. □

<sup>29</sup>McCoy, *The National Archives*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 7–11; and Gondos, *Birth of the National Archives*, pp. 151–152.



importance of preserving the nation's documentary heritage.