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Preserving the Stuff of History

Without papers and documents from the past, the historian of science would be helpless. Unfortunately, these valuable source materials are being destroyed at a startling rate in present-day America. Children today do not carry on a long family tradition, and heirlooms and papers kept for decades are being disposed of summarily.

Professor W——, for example, was a key figure in American science at the turn of the century. He carried out impressive research at one of our leading universities, founded an important journal, and organized one of our great research laboratories. His ideas were provocative and influential, and his pupils rose to eminent positions in the world of science. Yet today there exist no primary source materials relating to his work. His correspondence, notebooks, photograph albums, and manuscripts have disappeared.

What is needed to correct the situation is a Commission to Preserve the Private Papers of American Scientists. Whether the commission is set up as a private or government agency, its members would represent such institutions as the National Academy of Sciences, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and such organizations as the Society of American Archivists and the History of Science Society. The commission would have a twofold task. It would be a central agency carrying on a systematic and comprehensive search for source materials for the history of science, and, in this regard, it ought to be empowered to establish a national history of science archives in Washington.

It is doubtful whether any single collection, however grand, can do the job on the comprehensive scale required. As its second, and more important task, the commission should take action to stimulate and coordinate the archival work of the present scientific institutions and organizations. It is not enough that we have the papers of an Einstein. We need material concerning the *hundreds* of top-notch men doing important creative work in theoretical science and in the applied fields—medicine, engineering, industry, and so on. And we cannot predict which of these men will be of greatest interest to the future. Each scientific and educational institution—be it a university, museum, library, or research laboratory—has a part to play in finding and storing papers of potential historical value. And every scientific organization should have collections of relevant data at the national, regional, and local levels.

The heroic age of American science began shortly after the Civil War and reached its climax just after World War II. These years, during which we won a position of world leadership, will be of unique interest to future historians of science. Already we have let much of this rich heritage slip through our fingers. A strong and active commission of the kind proposed can still repair some of the damage. But time is running out.

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