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Ideology, Practicality, and Fiscal Necessity: The Creation of the Archives Nationales and the Triage of Feudal Titles by the Agence Temporaire Des Titres, 1789-1801

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IDEOLOGY, PRACTICALITY, AND FISCAL NECESSITY:
THE CREATION OF THE ARCHIVES NATIONALES AND THE TRIAGE OF
FEUDAL TITLES BY THE AGENCE TEMPORAIRE DES TITRES, 1789-1801.

By

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ABSTRACT

The Archives nationales has a history all its own—a history tied firmly to revolutionary ideology, pragmatism, and fiscal necessity. On 29 July 1789, a mere two weeks after the storming of the Bastille, legislators of the National Assembly voted to create a repository that would house all documents produced by and relative to the operations of the new state; it was named the Archives of the National Assembly. Revolutionaries later adopted the name “Archives nationales” and steadily gave form to the institution with each passing year. But on 25 June 1794, legislators consolidated all previous mandates concerning the Archives nationales into one decree—the law of 7 *messidor* II. The forty-eight articles outlined in 7 *messidor* II made it the most comprehensive law governing the Archives nationales throughout the course of the Revolution.

The establishment of the Archives nationales in 1789 and the state’s later efforts to acquire the deposits of the Old Regime illustrate a dramatic change in the French governmental attitudes towards archives. In relation to archival deposits maintained under the Old Regime, the notion of a *national* repository was itself quite revolutionary. For centuries, archives existed in private, decentralized deposits dispersed throughout the nation; revolutionaries were the first to erect a truly national repository that cataloged and maintained documents under the instruction of one institution.

At the start of their work in the fall of 1790, revolutionaries faced an estimated 5,700 archival repositories scattered across the country, each varying in size, content, and arrangement. But it was not until 1794 that legislators began an aggressive campaign to integrate deposits of the Old Regime into the Archives nationales in hopes of utilizing feudal records for the political, fiscal, or pedagogical benefit to the Revolution.

Since the creation of the Archives nationales was such an unprecedented attempt to consolidate and arrange records of the Old Regime and revolutionary state, the history of the Archives nationales is often told as a narrative of progress. Overtly positive interpretations of the archival legislation passed during the Revolution often fail to account for the Revolution’s destructive character. Legislators indeed designed the law of 7 *messidor* II to arrange and preserve all documents generated by the new state, alongside

records produced under the Old Regime. But the law also called for the deliberate and systematic destruction of feudal records by creating an agency, known as the Agence Temporaire des Titres, to carry out the *triage* of archival deposits—a process of examining and sorting records into two categories, labeling them with either the word “to preserve” (*conserver*) or “to annihilate” (*anéatir*). Legislators therefore designed the process of the triage in the law of 7 *messidor* II to distinguish between feudal documents that were considered either “useful” or “useless” to the nation.

Feudal titles to land, property, water, and windmills were among the most valuable and consistently sought after documents because they provided revenue to the Revolution; the state could sell titles to land and property that they acquired from the various Old Regime deposits as Bien Nationaux, thereby accruing a profit for the government. By contrast, titles of nobility, genealogy charts, and other records validating aristocratic privileges—referred in the collectively as “purely feudal titles” or “titles to abolished feudal rights”—were among the most sought after documents for annihilation because of the records’ association with “an abhorrent feudal past.”

The law of 7 *messidor* II originated at the height of radical violence and bloodshed; feudal titles to nobility and privilege fell victim to the National Convention because of the substantial power these records granted to the aristocracy in the feudal past—a past that stood, by its nature, in opposition to the new revolutionary state. The public burning of feudal records at the hands of the public and revolutionary government served as an important and particularly violent show of power—the destruction of records that represented the legal and symbolic power of the aristocracy came to signal an end to the political, social, and economic order of feudalism.

Scholarship regarding the law of 7 *messidor* II views revolutionary ideology as the strongest motivating factor in pushing the developments of the Archives nationales forward, but there are still other avenues that are just as important to our understanding of the Archives nationales that scholars have not yet explored. Even though revolutionaries supported archival destruction, practicality and the need to clear space in the holdings of the Archives was one alternative motive driving the destruction of documents. Financial necessity also inspired revolutionaries to preserve feudal records of financial utility; titles to land and property demonstrate how legislators put aside the ideological warfare they

raged on feudal records so long as the state could derive some monetary benefit from the papers left behind by the Old Regime.

Ideology, practicality, and fiscal necessity thus proved to be the central strategies governing the organization of the Archives nationales, the legislative mandates to seize and absorb deposits of the Old Regime, the creation of *7 messidor* II in 1794, and the triage of deposits throughout Revolution. The Agence Temporaire des Titres, in this examination, serves as a gateway to understanding the political, economic, and cultural contexts of the Revolution that shaped the developments of the Archives nationales and the triage of feudal records. We come to see that in practice, agents concentrated more on the recovery and preservation of records of financial utility and less on the destruction of feudal titles to nobility and privilege; the revenue provided by titles to land and property outweighed the ideological desire of revolutionaries to destroy the papers as “abhorrent” vestiges of feudalism.

The developments of the Archives nationales and the treatment of Old Regime records likewise illustrate major themes that are of particular interest to historians of the French Revolution; the destruction of feudal archives was one means used by the public and legislature to validate the defeat of aristocratic power and to prevent a return to the economic, social, and political structure of feudalism. The public burning of feudal documents also adds to our understanding of an emerging revolutionary culture that materialized in the form of festivals and celebratory performances. But the creation of the agency under the law of *7 messidor* II signified the ultimate transformation of the Archives nationales into a political instrument of the revolutionary state—whereby legislators could shape the laws governing the Archives to fulfill their ideological, political, historical, and fiscal interests. Hence, this thesis regards the Archives nationales not as a neutral site of information, but rather as a site of conflict between past and present regimes, between advocates of archival destruction and preservation, and between remembering and forgetting.

The goal of chapter one is to illustrate how the act of creating an archival repository for government documents forced legislators in 1789 to answer the questions

“what is an archive” and “what kind of documents are worth keeping.”¹ It begins with a summary of archival repositories before 1789 to better illustrate the distinction between record-keeping under the Old Regime and revolutionary government. The discussion then leads into a description of the first formative years of the Archives nationales between years 1789 and 1791, with emphasis on the ways in which legislators relied on the information yield by records of revolutionary and Old Regime origin. The bulk of the chapter details how National Archivist Armand-Gaston Camus organized documents, how legislators used records to serve their legal initiatives, and how their use of feudal documents led revolutionaries to reflect on the legal, fiscal, and historical power of documents created under the Old Regime and the potential of these records to threaten the new state.

Chapter two details the revolutionary treatment of archives between years 1789 and 1794. The goal of this chapter is to explain the political, cultural, and social landscape of this tumultuous period from which the law of 7 *messidor* II came into being. The first part describes the assault on feudal archives led by the rural and urban communities and draws out the popular perception of these records as markers of an “abhorrent” feudal past. The latter half details the laws of 1792 and 1793, which authorized the public burning of titles to abolished feudal rights and represented one facet of a much larger campaign of destruction intended to obliterate the vestiges of the Old Regime. The debates that took place between advocates of archival destruction and archival preservation in the session of 1792 reveal how the majority of legislators sought to manipulate the content of the Archives nationales to symbolize the Revolution’s political and ideological rejection of the Old Regime and to showcase the supremacy of the new state. The final section examines how the law of 7 *messidor* II was not only shaped by the ideological currents taking hold at the time, but also by the practical and fiscal necessities of the state.

¹ Jennifer Milligan, “What Is an Archive?” in the History of Modern France,” *Archives Stories* (2005), 159. Milligan briefly traces the history of the Archives nationales from the Revolution of 1789 to the Second Empire in an effort to show how the history of the Archives cannot be separated from the political history of France. In doing so, she characterizes the effects of changes in sovereignty on the Archives nationales. See also Ernst Posner, “Effects of Changes on Sovereignty on Archives,” *The American Archivist* 5, no. 3 (July 1942).

Chapter three features a comprehensive examination of the policies and practices of the Agence Temporaire des Titres in an effort to show how the triage of Old Regime deposits was more difficult to carry out in practice than legislators anticipated. It begins by describing the size and scope of Old Regime deposits in order to grasp just how large of a logistical challenge it was for agents to separate titles of utility from titles destined by law for annihilation. The inconsistencies, challenges, and contradictions of the triage become apparent as readers trace the work of the agency over the course of its six years in operation. Undeniably, the destruction of records took place at the hands of the Agence Temporaire des Titres. What is disputed, however, is the *extent* to which agents could and did destroy titles to abolished feudal privileges. The latter part of this chapter, therefore, is reserved to show the factors that account for why feudal titles of abolished feudal rights still exist in the holdings of the Archives nationales to this day.

INTRODUCTION

On 29 July 1789, a mere two weeks after the storming of the Bastille, legislators of the National Assembly voted to create a repository that would house all documents produced by and relative to the operations of the new state.¹ It was named the Archives of the National Assembly. Revolutionaries later adopted the name “Archives nationales” on 12 September 1790 after assuming custody of records created under the Old Regime.² The law of 1790 further specified the internal organization of the Archives by outlining the qualifications and duties of the National Archivist, hours of operation, and the annual budget.³ On 27 December 1791, legislators designed a method for receiving, cataloging, and distributing records.⁴

Revolutionaries steadily gave form to the Archives nationales with each passing year. On 25 June 1794, legislators consolidated all previous mandates concerning the Archives into one decree—the law of 7 *messidor* II. This law strengthened the procedures for arranging archival collections and gave specific details about what type of records archivists were obligated to preserve.⁵ Legislators designed 7 *messidor* II to protect all documents generated by the revolutionary state, such as “the works of the national assemblies and their various committees, procès-verbaux of the electoral bodies, [and] the seals of the republic,” alongside records produced under the Old Regime, which consisted of different “types of currency, standards of weights and measures, treaties with other nations, titles of national properties situated in foreign countries, census records...and all charters and manuscripts that belong to history, to the sciences and to

¹ *Archives Parlementaires* (henceforth referred to as *AP*) 29 July 1789, 302-303.

² The law united the archival deposits of the Old Regime and revolutionary state by calling for the preservation of “all acts which establish the Constitution of the kingdom, its public right, its laws and its distribution in departments.” *AP* 4 September 1790; 7 September 1790; decreed into law on the 12 September 1790.

³ The National Archivist held a six year term in office and that eligible for reelection. His duties were to conserve and organize all documents produced by the National Assembly and state offices, to publicize Assembly debates, and to ensure the proper distribution and communication of documents between officials. The law also called for the hiring of two commissioners to supervise the Archives nationales; one nominated by the legislative body, the other nominated by the king. Regarding hours, “the archives will be open, for answering public demands, three days out of the week, from nine in the morning until two, then from five in the afternoon until nine in the evening. But no one shall be able to enter the cabinets and offices during the day. No one shall be allowed to carry fire or light.” *AP Annexes* 1791, “L’état des Archives nationales.”

⁴ *AP* 27 December 1791.

⁵ *AP* 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794).

the arts, or that serve public instruction.”⁶ The forty-eight articles outlined in *7 messidor* II made it the most comprehensive law governing the Archives nationales throughout the course of the Revolution.⁷

The notion of a *national* repository was itself quite revolutionary.⁸ Record-keeping in the Old Regime was a privatized and privileged undertaking. King of France Philippe-Auguste founded the first collection of records relative to state operations in 1194, known as the Trésor des Chartes.⁹ The deposit grew in size as each successive monarch generated and accumulated papers of legal, fiscal, and historical content specific to the king’s domain. Noble families, churches, municipalities, universities, and hospitals likewise preserved documents relative to their own unique affairs. Archival repositories that originated in the Middle Ages remained in this decentralized state until revolutionaries in 1790 began to restructure the nation’s archival landscape by absorbing and confiscating records created under the Old Regime.

Legislators continued to centralize the deposits of the Old Regime throughout the decade of the Revolution. At the start of their work in the fall of 1790, revolutionaries faced an estimated 5,700 archival repositories scattered across the country, each varying in size, content, and arrangement.¹⁰ But it was not until 1794 that legislators began an aggressive campaign to integrate deposits of the Old Regime into the Archives nationales in hopes of utilizing feudal records for the political, fiscal, or pedagogical benefit to the Revolution.

⁶ Legislators instructed the Archives nationales to send all items for history, the sciences, the arts and that serve for public instruction to the newly-created Bibliothèque nationale. *AP 7 messidor* II (25 June 1794).

⁷ Members of the *Agence Temporaire des Titres* refer to the law of *7 messidor* II in many reports as the primary doctrine governing the Archives nationales. See *Compte Rendus* held in the collections AB Vc 2 and AB Vc 3.

⁸ Posner and the Favier also regard the Archives nationales of France as the start of modern archives worldwide. Other European archives at the time mirrored the decentralized, privatized archives of Old Regime France. See Jean and Lucie Favier, *Archives Nationales: Quinze Siècles D'histoire* (Paris: Nathan, 1988), Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 2 (July 1940).

⁹ King Philippe-Auguste of France, also known as Philippe II Augustus, reigned from 1180 to 1223. M. Hofer, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale Depuis Les Temps Les Plus Reculés Jusqu'à Nos Jours : Avec Les Renseignements Bibliographiques Et L'indication Des Sources À Consulter*, vol. 28 (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1855-1866), 2.

¹⁰ Parisian deposits made up an estimated 1,225 of this total number (estimate calculated in the year 1782). G.C.M. Richou, *Traité Du Théorique Et Pratique Des Archives Publiques* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1883), footnote 25.

The establishment of the Archives nationales in 1789 and the state's later efforts to acquire the deposits of the Old Regime illustrate a dramatic change in the French governmental attitudes towards archives. Whereas the king under the Old Regime sought only to preserve papers relative to his affairs, the revolutionaries as a whole assumed the role of caretaker of the nation's archival heritage. And whereas for centuries, archives had existed in private, decentralized deposits dispersed throughout the nation, revolutionaries were the first to erect a truly national repository that cataloged and maintained documents under the instruction of one institution.

Scholarship on the Archives Nationales

Since the creation of the Archives nationales was such an unprecedented attempt to consolidate and arrange records of the Old Regime and revolutionary state, the history of the Archives nationales is often told as a narrative of progress. According to American archivist Ernst Posner, "the French Revolution marks the beginning of a new era in archival administration."¹¹ Posner commends revolutionaries for establishing the first national archival administration, for acknowledging the "documentary heritage of the past," and for authorizing public access to the Archives.¹² His article represents a landmark understanding of the impact of the French Revolution on modern archives.¹³ French archivists interpret the management of records during the Revolution along similar lines. Jean and Lucie Favier, former archivists at the Archives nationales, trace the history and administration of record-keeping over five centuries of French history.¹⁴

¹¹ Posner, "Some Aspects," 161.

¹² Please note that the concept of public access in today's archival setting differed from "public" access in revolutionary times because legislators did not allow *everyone* permission to see the holdings in the Archives nationales. Posner, "Some Aspects," 161,162.

¹³ The Society of American Archivists and most literature in the field agree with Posner's interpretation. Few archivists have reevaluated Posner's 1914 publication on the impact of the French Revolution on modern archives. For those who call for a reevaluation of Posner's case, see Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 59 (Winter 1996) and Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 31, no. 1 (January 1968).

¹⁴ Jean and Lucie Favier both made careers at the Archives nationales. Jean served as National Archivist (1975-1994) and his wife, Lucie Favier, dedicated over forty years of service. The Favieres contribute significantly to the conversation on the Archives nationales during the Revolution. *La Mémoire De L'état : Histoire Des Archives Nationales* (Paris: Fayard, 2004) is the most contemporary and comprehensive evaluation of the Archives nationales since the nineteenth-century publications of Henri Bordier (*Les Archives de la France*, 1855) and Leon de Laborde (*Les Archives de la France pendant la Révolution*, 1866). The Favieres pay specific attention in this co-authored book to archival legislation, the guards and

Like Posner, the Faviers generate an overwhelmingly positive portrait of the Archives nationales during the Revolution.

While the creation of a national archival repository undoubtedly represents a progression from the decentralized and diverse repositories of the Old Regime towards the modern archival science of the twenty-first century, overly optimistic interpretations of the archival legislation passed in the early years of the Revolution often fail to account for the Revolution's destructive character.¹⁵ Those who reference archival destruction generally present a somewhat subdued recognition of the darker side of 7 *messidor* II which called for the deliberate and systematic destruction of feudal records.¹⁶ Legislators created this law to standardize the arrangement and preservation of documents created and acquired by the revolutionary state, yet the law also created an agency, known as the Agence Temporaire des Titres, to carry out the *triage* of archival deposits—a process of examining and sorting records into two categories, labeling them with either the word “to preserve” (*conserver*) or “to annihilate” (*anéatir*).¹⁷ Indeed, 7 *messidor* II permitted agents to preserve records of important legal content, financial utility, or service to history, the sciences, or the arts, or that serve public instruction. But the law simultaneously mandated the destruction of “purely feudal titles” (*les titres purement féodaux*), as well as those papers that did not offer the state some utility or reason to warrant their preservation.¹⁸

directors who presided over the Archives nationales, and changes in the structure and arrangement of documents over time. See also Favier, *Archives Nationales: Quinze Siècles D'histoire*.

¹⁵ Posner and the Faviers are the most modern positive interpretations of the Archives nationales.

¹⁶ Panitch, Lokke, and Starn recognize that archival destruction took place, but fail to discuss the legislative mandates that authorized the burning of feudal documents or other motivations besides ideology that influenced the decisions of the state. See Randolph Starn, "Truth in the Archives," *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 2 (2002).

¹⁷ Legislators designed the triage to take place in each department of France, after electing “citizens knowledgeable of charters, laws and monuments” to the agency. The number of agents and the time allotted for their work varied according to volume of Old Regime deposits specific to their area. Paris agents received six months to carry out the triage, whereas agents in the departments generally received four months. Legislators later renamed the agency to the Bureau du Triage des Titres preliminarily on 4 *ventôse* IV (23 February 1796) and officially with the law of 5 *floréal* IV (24 April 1796); *AP 7 messidor* II (25 June 1794), 386-387.

¹⁸ The agency would divide records that were to be preserved into another two categories: “state-owned titles” and “judicial works.” The first category held titles relative to the national domain and were sent to the *section domaniale*, whereas papers of legal, historic, scientific, or artistic value went to the *section juridique*. *AP 7 messidor* II (25 June 1794), 386-387.

Legislators therefore designed the process of the triage in the law of 7 *messidor* II to distinguish between feudal documents that were considered “useful” and “useless” to the nation. Revolutionaries kept papers of legal proceedings, such as marriage contracts and the papers of the intendants, because these documents supplied information about the operations of the Old Regime and could help legislators consolidate legal power in the new state. Revolutionaries also sought to keep papers of historic, scientific, and artistic content for educational purposes. Feudal titles to land, property, water, and windmills were among the most valuable and consistently sought after documents because they provided revenue to the Revolution; the state could sell titles to land and property that they acquired from the various Old Regime deposits as *Bien Nationaux*, thereby accruing a profit for the government. By contrast, titles of nobility, genealogy charts, and other records validating aristocratic privileges—referred to collectively as “purely feudal titles” or “titles to abolished feudal rights”—were among the most sought after documents for annihilation because of the records’ association with “an abhorrent feudal past.”¹⁹

Overall, the literature on the Archives nationales does not provide a full understanding of the historical context of its laws and developments or the issues that motivated revolutionaries to create the agency and shape the function of the triage as they did.²⁰ Authors who mention the burning of feudal records in their interpretations do not generally associate the agency with archival destruction.²¹ Instead, they identify agents as persons responsible for the preservation and organizing of deposits.²² Those few scholars who acknowledge the agency, however, fail to offer an explanation for why 7 *messidor* II—a law passed at the height of radical Jacobin power—and the process of the triage persisted throughout the course of the Revolution virtually unchanged.²³

¹⁹ AP 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794).

²⁰ Even the Faviers do not give proper recognition to vandalism or archival destruction in their interpretation of the Archives nationales during the Revolution.

²¹ The works of Panitch, Lokke, and Starn are prime examples.

²² See 12 May 1792, 19 June 1792, 13 July 1793 for calls in the legislature in favor of archival destruction. Posner and the Faviers interpret 7 *messidor* II as a symbol of progress and commend revolutionaries for their positive contribution to the archival development of France, yet fail to acknowledge legislative mandates of destruction.

²³ Bordier, Laborde, and Gautherot are the only authors to really explore the agency. Note that Bordier and Laborde wrote in the mid-nineteenth-century and Gautherot’s latest work on the Archives nationales was published in 1914. See Henri Bordier, *Les Archives De La France Ou Histoire Des Archives De L’empire, Des Archives Des Ministères, Des Communes, Des Hôpitaux, Des Greffes, Des Notaires, Etc., Contenant L’inventaire D’une Partie De Ces Dépôts* (Paris: 1855), Henri Bordier, *Les Inventaires Des Archives De*

The law of 7 *messidor* II originated at the height of radical violence and bloodshed; feudal titles to nobility and privilege fell victim to the National Convention because of the substantial power these records granted to the aristocracy in the past—a past that stood, by its nature, in opposition to the new revolutionary state.²⁴ The public burning of feudal records at the hands of the public and revolutionary government served as an important and particularly violent show of power—the destruction of records that represented the legal and symbolic power of the aristocracy came to signal an end to the political, social, and economic order of feudalism. But concurrent efforts of the revolutionary state to preserve feudal records of financial utility, especially titles to land and property, demonstrate how revolutionaries could put aside the ideological warfare they waged on feudal records so long as the state could derive some utility from the papers left behind by the Old Regime.

The History of the Archives Nationales in the Context of Revolutionary Events

The developments of the Archives nationales and the treatment of Old Regime records throughout the Revolution illustrate major themes that are of particular interest to historians of the French Revolution, such as the destruction of Old Regime symbols led by both the public and revolutionary government, the abolition of feudalism, the creation of a new revolutionary culture, and the fiscal uncertainties that concerned legislators.²⁵ The assault on feudal archives by rural and urban participants relates, in part, to significant works on crowd activity that illustrate popular discontent towards and rejection of the feudal structure.²⁶ The government's handling of feudal records also

L'empire, Réponse À M. Le Marquis De Laborde...Contenant Un Errata Pour Ses Préfaces Et Ses Inventaires (Paris: Bachelin-Deflorenne, 1867), Gustave Gautherot, *Le Vandalisme Jacobin: Dstructions Administratives D'archives, D'objects D'art, De Monuments Religieux À L'époque Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1914), Gustave Gautherot, "Les Dstructions Des Archives À L'époque Révolutionnaire " *Revue des questions historiques* (1914), Leon de Laborde, *Les Archives De La France Pendant La Révolution: Introduction L'inventaire Du Fonds D'archives Dit Les Monuments Historiques* (Paris: Imprimerie de J. Claye, 1866).

²⁴ See article 9a of AP 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794), 385.

²⁵ And other time periods as well. There is a wide literature on book and archival destruction under Nazi Germany and during the Russian and Chinese Revolutions.

²⁶ Charles Tilly studies discontent in a broad political context by tracing popular demonstrations in France over the course of four centuries. See Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French : Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University 1986). Alternatively, Georges Lefebvre, David Andress, and Albert Soboul examine specific groups of demonstrators that influenced the Revolution in some capacity. Lefebvre details the pillaging and destruction of feudal symbols during the Great Fear;

contributes to a greater understanding of the revolutionary political culture that several renowned historians have developed.²⁷ The destruction of feudal archives, when viewed against larger currents of the Revolution, represents one facet of a much larger political and cultural campaign against the Old Regime. Revolutionaries organized festivals in commemoration of revolutionary events, erected monuments and institutions inspired by revolutionary principles, and destroyed physical markers of the feudalism, including its documentary evidence, to validate the end the Old Regime. Archival destruction can thus be seen as part of much broader ideological, political, and cultural changes taking place at the expense of the Old Regime.

David Andress cites specific examples of urban worker demonstrations in Paris; Albert Soboul studies destruction and vandalism of the sans-culottes. See David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ De Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2000), Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes; the Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793-1794*, trans. Rémy Inglis Hall (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). Significant works on revolutionary vandalism by ascending publication date: Gustave Gautherot, *Le Vandalisme Jacobin: Dstructions Administratives D'archives, D'objects D'art, De Monuments Religieux À L'époque Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1914); Gustave Gautherot, "Les Dstructions Des Archives À L'époque Révolutionnaire " *Revue des questions historiques* (1914); Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973); George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Emmet Kennedy, "Vandalism and Conservation," in *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Edgard Boutaric, *Le Vandalisme Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Editions du Trident, 1989); *Révolution Française Et "Vandalisme Révolutionnaire": Actes Du Colloque International De Clermont-Ferrand 15-17 Decembre 1988*, ed. Marie-Claude Chemin Simone Bernard-Griffiths, Jean Ehrard (Paris: Universitas, 1992); Clay Ramsay, *The Ideology of the Great Fear: The Soissonnais in 1789* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992); François Souchal, *Le Vandalisme De La Révolution* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1993); Dario Gamboni, "A Historical Outline," in *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), François Souchal, *Le Vandalisme De La Révolution* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1993); Gustave Gautherot provides the most comprehensive analysis of the political factors motivating public attacks on feudal documents and places particular emphasis on legislative mandates for archival destruction. He is also the first historian to stress the financial gains which motivated the passing of 7 messidor II and the work of the Agence Temporaire des Titres.

²⁷ The revolutionary treatment of Old Regime deposits relates specifically to the works of John Markoff, Keith Baker, Lynn Hunt, and Mona Ozouf because we come to see the destruction of feudal documents as a part of a larger government campaign to erase the identity of the Old Regime. Markoff investigates the ways in which legislators, especially in the first formative years of the Revolution, tried to abolish feudalism by attacking the legal, economic, and social edifices of the feudal structure. Mona Ozouf also examines the breakdown of the Old Regime order, but places more emphasis on the creation the revolutionary culture and identity that took shape in the form of festivals and ceremonies. Hunt and Baker particularly draw out the changes in language, the use of symbolism, and the creation of revolutionary rhetoric as evidence of the political, cultural, and social transformations taking place at the turn of the eighteenth-century. See Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1984), John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

The topic of archival destruction extends into the literature on the construction and malleability of historical memory.²⁸ Revolutionaries universally recognized that the contents of the Archives nationales reflected the values and beliefs of the revolutionary state. “It is not the quantity of titles but the choice of titles alone,” which makes a deposit worthy of a great nation, wrote an agent of the Agence Temporaire des Titres in 1795.²⁹ Similarly, they acknowledged that the writing of history and the construction of social memory—“of chronology, of science, and art, and of alliances between the people of the world”—derived from archival sources. Additionally, they believed that history could be altered based on the presence or absence of information. The type of documents preserved in the Archives nationales, therefore, became an expression of what vision or interpretation of history the government wanted the nation to remember. This is a theme that relates directly to the works of Robert Gildea and Pierre Nora, who each discuss the methods used by political, religious, and academic groups to portray, alter, and suppress the social perception of past events in order to fulfill their goals.

But while the majority of legislators across the Revolution supported the idea of archival destruction—as a means of bonding the nation in a shared hatred of the Old Regime or to clear space in the holdings of the Archives nationales—there was a small minority of individuals who fought for archival preservation. The most prominent debate to have materialized between advocates of archival destruction and archival preservation took place in May of 1792, two years prior to the creation of the Agence Temporaire des Titres. Those who advocated the preservation of feudal records argued that even titles to abolished feudal rights were valuable artifacts of French history, whereas their opponents contended that such documents tainted the historical heritage of France by perpetuating the image of an “abhorrent” feudal past.³⁰

²⁸ See Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), Françoise Hildesheimer, *Les Archives De France: Mémoire De L'histoire* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking the French Past: Realms of Memory*, vol. II: Traditions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking the French Past: Realms of Memory*, vol. I: Conflicts and Divisions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking the French Past: Realms of Memory*, vol. III: Symbols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²⁹ AB Vc 2, “Compte Général Rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres” Brumaire III, (November 1795).

³⁰ AP 12 May 1792.

Though literature exists on the revolutionary perception of French history and the shaping of social memory during the Revolution, historians of the Archives nationales fail to acknowledge the presence of legislators who opposed the destruction of feudal archives. Similarly, no one has yet analyzed the variety of arguments calling for the preservation of “purely feudal titles;” some contended that all feudal documents, regardless of their content, had a historical significance in their own right and should be kept. Another group claimed that it would be better to keep the records because the state might have an unanticipated need for them in the future. Still others feared the accidental destruction of precious materials that might be mistaken for titles to nobility and privilege in the triage process.

The attempts to destroy feudal archives and concurrent efforts to preserve them, in one vein, can be seen as a battle of conflicting ideologies. Those in favor of erasing the memory of feudalism pushed archival destruction as an ideological means of confirming the political, social, and cultural downfall of the Old Regime; the destruction of feudal archives likewise confirmed the Revolution’s triumph over history. By contrast, those in favor of preserving Old Regime archives predominantly argued that “purely feudal titles” could enhance the legacy of the Revolution because feudal records provided evidence of the country’s former absurdities, inconsistencies, and irrationalities.

Scholarship regarding the law of 7 *messidor* II also views revolutionary ideology as the strongest motivating factor in the developments of the Archives nationales, much in the same way that François Furet and Keith Baker saw ideology as the primary driving force of the Revolution. But there are still other avenues that are just as important to our understanding of the Archives nationales as ideology that scholars have not yet explored. Even though revolutionaries supported archival destruction, compelled by a strong ideological desire to erase the memory of the feudal past, practicality and fiscal necessity were alternative motives driving the destruction of documents. Legislators had to decide, on practical terms, whether titles to nobility and privilege warranted keeping; could they offer some legal, fiscal, or historical utility to the state? And if not, why should revolutionaries make an effort to preserve them in the Archives nationales?

Archivists, on the one hand, who cater to the readers of their profession, focus predominantly on the structural and administrative evolution of the Archives nationales.

In doing so, they generally forgo a detailed analysis of the political, economic, and cultural environment which spawned the creation and design of the Archives nationales.³¹ Historians, on the other hand, devote the majority of their attention to the political and ideological context surrounding the creation of the Archives nationales, but they do so only in a limited way—focusing predominantly on the period up to the passing of 7 *messidor* II and overlooking the complexity and difficulties surrounding the work of archivists.³²

This failure to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Archives nationales in the larger scope of revolutionary events becomes especially prominent in the discussion on the law of 1794. Scholars fail to contextualize the law within the political, cultural, and particularly the economic circumstances surrounding the passage of 7 *messidor* II in 1794—a time of violence, war, internal conflict, and financial instability. But while 7 *messidor* II appears to have outlined a clear and systematic means of removing titles to abolished feudal rights from deposits acquired by the state, in truth however, the task of filtering documents was far more complicated than revolutionaries initially anticipated.

Reinterpreting the Archives Nationales and the Agence Temporaire des Titres

A very different portrait of the Archives nationales emerges when analyzing the work of the agency more closely and in the historical context of the triage operation. Economic motives played just as important of a role, if not more so than ideology, in the push to continue the triage throughout the Revolution. Political difficulties, religious divisions, civil and foreign war, the depreciation of assignats, and increasing inflation contributed to the financial pressure that threatened to bring down the new revolutionary

³¹ See Posner, the Favières, and Hildesheimer.

³² The most recent American scholarship on the Archives nationales focuses predominantly on nineteenth-century events. Jennifer S. Milligan of Rutgers University and Lara Moore at Stanford University provide background information on the Archives nationales during the Revolution, but only in so far as the information helps frame and contextualize the handling of records under the Second Empire. Both Moore and Milligan discuss the impact of political developments and changes in sovereignty on the direction of the Archives. However, Moore specifically investigates the measures taken by the Ecole des Chartes to organize the immense quantity of archives abandoned in storage by revolutionaries, which gives the impression that many feudal records survived the triage. Jennifer S. Milligan, "Making a Modern Archive: The Archives Nationales of France, 1850-1887" (Rutgers University, 2002), Lara Jennifer Moore, "Restoring Order: The Ecoles Des Chartes and the Organization of Archives and Libraries in France, 1820-1870" (Stanford University, 2001).

government. Legislators in 1794 felt especially vulnerable as European forces and counter-revolutionary activity escalated.

Radical Jacobins indeed designed the law of 7 *messidor* II in 1794, but legislators continued the triage of documents six years after the fall of Jacobin power because they viewed the agency as a source of financial stability for the state. Legislators could accumulate and sell goods formerly belonging to the church and French nobility as Bien Nationaux, but only if they could first seize their archival deposits and then physically obtain their titles to land and property. If legislators created the agency simply to serve as an ideological Jacobin attack on the Old Regime, then later with less radical political agendas would have terminated the agency, much in the same way they discontinued so many of the Jacobin policies, including the revolutionary tribunals and guillotine executions.

The internal organization of the Archives nationales also responded to practical necessity. Revolutionaries recognized the importance of finding documents they wished to consult within a reasonable amount of time in the first formative years of the Archives nationales. Archivists from 1789 to 1791 instituted a system of arranging and processing papers to provide legislators with quick access to information. Their system of arranging documents produced by the revolutionary state proved useful when workers later had to organize the deposits of the Old Regime. Legislators in 1794 tried to enhance the efficiency of the Archives nationales as the need to locate titles to property and land grew into an urgent necessity. They created the Agence Temporaire des Titres as a means to ensure the acquisition of titles of financial utility and to decrease the volume of deposits to fit these papers of utility by discarding titles to abolished feudal rights or other records deemed “useless.” And so while modern archivists praise revolutionaries for introducing new techniques and managing collections in ways different from their predecessors, this progress must be viewed as a consequence of their pragmatism and their need to find records of financial utility in a quick and efficient manner.

Ideology, practicality, and fiscal necessity thus proved to be the forces shaping the organization of the Archives nationales, the legislative mandates to seize and absorb deposits of the Old Regime, the creation of 7 *messidor* II in 1794, and the triage of deposits throughout Revolution. In practice, agents concentrated more on the recovery

and preservation of records of financial utility and less on the destruction of feudal titles to nobility and privilege; the revenue provided by titles to land and property outweighed the ideological desire of revolutionaries to destroy the papers as “abhorrent” vestiges of feudalism.

A Reevaluation of the Agency Using Primary Source Material

There exists a great quantity of archival sources created by and relative to the Agence Temporaire des Titres. No scholar has yet explored these documents thoroughly. Authors list the names of agents and briefly describe the relationship between the agency and the Archives nationales, but examinations lack analysis of the daily practices or challenges and inconsistencies faced by agents as they carried out the triage of Old Regime deposits. In short, there is need to illustrate the procedure for processing records—both those destined for preservation and those for annihilation—in order to trace the success of the triage.³³

As a result of the incomplete portrayals of the Agence Temporaire des Titres in the literature on the Archives nationales, there exists a good deal of confusion and misconception surrounding the agency’s work.³⁴ The goal of this investigation, therefore, is to utilize primary source material to reconstruct the triage process, to measure the accomplishments and challenges faced by agents, to understand the intricate and contradictory procedures governing its workers, and to recognize how such practices ultimately impeded the ability and accuracy of agents to fulfill the expectations of the legislature. It is equally important to trace the agency over the course of the Revolution in order to draw out the origins and evolutions of these difficulties in the triage process.

³³ Laborde and Bordier are the most prominent historians to debate the extent in which agents truthfully destroyed feudal documents. Laborde is overtly critical of revolutionaries in his analysis and argues that the state destroyed a great quantity of archives. He contends that the revolutionary government discarded an estimated 222,916 pounds of feudal records, but Bordier questions this calculation and instead claims that documents once thought to have been lost actually resurfaced years later.³³ However, neither author examines the Agence Temporaire des Titres closely enough to provide an accurate picture of the triage to validate their claims that feudal records certainly perished or survived. See Bordier writing in response to Laborde’s publication in Bordier, *Les Inventaires Des Archives De L’empire, Réponse À M. Le Marquis De Laborde...Contenant Un Errata Pour Ses Préfaces Et Ses Inventaires*.

³⁴ The most apparent misconception promulgated by scholars is the belief that legislators mandated the destruction of *all* documents of the Old Regime—including feudal titles of legal, financial, or historical value. See Panitch and Laborde for more detail.

In their six years of operation, we see that agents were more preoccupied with preserving useful papers of the Old Regime than destroying titles of nobility and privilege—a fact which calls for a de-emphasis of the ideological motives for creating the Agence Temporaire des Titres that scholars convey in their works. This interpretation of the agency and the triage of feudal documents, therefore, is a return to an economic interpretation of the Revolution that draws on the more practical factors that motivated political reform. Since Furet, studies of the Revolution have turned away from social and economic analysis towards politics and ideology. However, one does not need to be a Marxist to make the case that money was one factor driving politics at this time; one must only be mindful of the role that money played in shaping laws and to acknowledge that financial wealth was necessary to procure and secure political dominance in revolutionary times.³⁵ The work of the agency offers evidence to establish that economic motivations shaped the triage process, such as the need to find documents of fiscal utility to the state.

Chapter Synopsis

The goal of chapter one is to illustrate how the act of creating an archival repository for government documents forced legislators in 1789 to answer the questions “what is an archive?” and “what kind of documents are worth keeping?”³⁶ It begins with a summary of archival repositories before 1789 to better illustrate the distinction between record-keeping under the Old Regime and revolutionary government. The discussion then leads into a description of the first formative years of the Archives nationales between years 1789 and 1791, with emphasis on the ways in which legislators relied on the information yielded by records of revolutionary and Old Regime origin. The bulk of the chapter details how National Archivist Armand-Gaston Camus organized documents, how legislators used records to serve their legal initiatives, and how their use of feudal

³⁵ See Colin Jones, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," in *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed. Gary Kates (New York: Routledge, 1998).

³⁶ Jennifer Milligan, "'What Is an Archive?' in the History of Modern France," *Archives Stories* (2005), 159. Milligan briefly traces the history of the Archives nationales from the Revolution of 1789 to the Second Empire in an effort to show how the history of the Archives cannot be separated from the political history of France. In doing so, she characterizes the effects of changes in sovereignty on the Archives nationales. See also Ernst Posner, "Effects of Changes on Sovereignty on Archives," *The American Archivist* 5, no. 3 (July 1942).

documents led revolutionaries to reflect on the legal, fiscal, and historical power of documents created under the Old Regime and the potential of these records to threaten the new state.

Chapter two details the revolutionary treatment of archives between years 1789 and 1794. The goal of this chapter is to explain the political, cultural, and social landscape of this tumultuous period from which the law of 7 *messidor* II came into being. The first part describes the assault on feudal archives led by the rural and urban communities and draws out the popular perception of these records as markers of an “abhorrent” feudal past. The latter half details the laws of 1792 and 1793, which authorized the public burning of titles to abolished feudal rights and represented one facet of a much larger campaign of destruction intended to obliterate the vestiges of the Old Regime. The debates that took place between advocates of archival destruction and archival preservation in the session of 1792 reveal how the majority of legislators sought to manipulate the content of the Archives nationales to symbolize the Revolution’s political and ideological rejection of the Old Regime and to showcase the supremacy of the new state. The final section examines how the law of 7 *messidor* II was not only shaped by the ideological currents taking hold at the time, but also by the practical and fiscal necessities of the state.

Chapter three features a comprehensive examination of the policies and practices of the Agence Temporaire des Titres in an effort to show how the triage of Old Regime deposits was more difficult to carry out in practice than legislators anticipated. It begins by describing the size and scope of Old Regime deposits in order to grasp just how large of a logistical challenge it was for agents to separate titles of utility from titles destined by law for annihilation. The inconsistencies, challenges, and contradictions of the triage become apparent as readers trace the work of the agency over the course of its six years in operation. Undeniably, the destruction of records took place at the hands of the Agence Temporaire des Titres. What is disputed, however, is the *extent* to which agents could and did destroy titles to abolished feudal privileges. The latter part of this chapter, therefore, is reserved to show the factors that account for why feudal titles of abolished feudal rights still exist in the holdings of the Archives nationales to this day.

ARCHIVAL BEGINNINGS AND THE LEGAL POWER OF DOCUMENTS IN
THE REVOLUTIONARY STATE:
THE ARCHIVES NATIONALES, 1789-1791

The policies governing the Archives nationales in its first formative years demonstrate how a record in revolutionary times had to deserve its preservation; a document, regardless of its origin under the Old Regime or revolutionary state, must have offered the government some utility, be it financial, legal, or pedagogical, that could convince archivists that the record warranted protection in the Archives nationales. Legislators relied on revolutionary documents to fulfill their legal initiatives because they identified archival evidence as valid sources of information. They drew upon their records to monitor the work of state agencies and the overall health of the nation. Legislators also began to use feudal records to their advantage as archivists integrated the deposits of the Old Regime into the holdings of the Archives nationales. But revolutionaries soon recognized that feudal records held legal standing in the new state because legislators relied on documents created under the Old Regime in the same vein as documents created by the new state. This perception of the legal power of feudal documents would later incite revolutionaries in 1792 to call for their destruction, under the belief that feudal records could potentially threaten the security of the Revolution.

Record-keeping Before the Outbreak of the Revolution

While modern historians generally applaud the efforts of revolutionaries to create and manage the first national repository in the history of France, it is undeniable that record-keeping was actually a long-standing tradition firmly grounded in the Old Regime.³⁷ The first systematic gathering of documents by the state appeared in 1194, with the creation of the Trésor des Chartes. Philippe-Auguste created this archival deposit

³⁷ Other major European powers maintained records for political and personal use. The Archivo de Simancas in Spain was the largest archival repository known in sixteenth-century Europe and housed records of councils, courts, chancelleries, secretaries, etc. James I of England also kept his papers in a central deposit under the supervision of two caretakers (Levinus Monk and Thomas Wilson), known as “keepers and registers of papers and records.” And lastly, the Vatican in Italy maintained a substantial number of records relative to the Pope’s religious and political duties. Michel Duchein, “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archives Profession in Europe,” *The American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992), 16.

to serve as a central, stationary repository of all papers relative to his domain.³⁸ The Trésor des Chartes was the first systemized attempt to gather and organize documents under the French monarchy. It contained papers relative to king's domain, defenses, and authority, such as of treaties, acts, transactions of land purchases and exchanges, birth records, and topographical maps.³⁹ The deposit grew gradually over the course of the centuries as successive monarchs created and accumulated more records. The reputation of the king's deposits likewise grew with each passing century. A witness in 1655 described the Trésor des Chartes as "one of the greatest and most considerable affairs" to have taken place since the establishment of the monarchy," a sanctuary for invaluable markers of French history, such as ancient registers, chronicles, and memoirs.⁴⁰

Historian Françoise Hildesheimer characterizes the condition of record-keeping prior to the outbreak of Revolution as "a great dispersion."⁴¹ Institutions, such as universities, churches, congregational orders, hospitals, corporations, and local municipalities, alongside private notaries and noble families all created archival repositories to hold records relevant to their unique administrative, territorial, and fiscal affairs.⁴² And because "each institution, 'community,' administration, and locality conserved their archives, as each family conserved theirs," the dates of origins and methods of organizing these deposits varied significantly.⁴³

Record-keeping in the Old Regime remained a private practice even as the king proceeded to centralize his political, economic, and social control over the nation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁴ Up through the reign of Louis XVI, French monarchs neither felt obliged nor fiscally responsible to maintain the records of other

³⁸ It has been said that King Philippe-Auguste created the Trésor des Chartes because he lost many important papers after a surprise attack from the King of England. Françoise Hildesheimer, *Les Archives De France: Mémoire De L'histoire* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), 17; Alexandre M. Teulet, *Layettes Trésor Des Chartes* (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1977), iv.

³⁹ Jean and Lucie Favier, *Archives Nationales: Quinze Siècles D'histoire* (Paris: Nathan, 1988), 6-7.

⁴⁰ Pierre Dupuy, "Traité De La Majorité De Nos Rois Et Des Régences Du Royaume, Avec Les Preuves Tirées Tant Du Trésor Des Chartes Du Roy Que Des Registres Du Parlement Et Autres Lieux; Ensemble Un Traité Des Prééminences Du Parlement De Paris," (Paris: 1655).

⁴¹ Hildesheimer, 19.

⁴² Françoise Hildesheimer, "Les Archives Nationales," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructures, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 8.

⁴³ Gustave Gautherot, "Les Destructures Des Archives À L'époque Révolutionnaire " *Revue des questions historiques* (1914), 456.

⁴⁴ Olga P. Palmer, "The History of European Archival Literature," *The American Archivist* 2, no. 2 (April 1939), 70. Cited in Fritsch Ahasver, *Jena Tractatus de iure archive et concellariae*, 1664.

individuals or institutions unless these papers contributed, in some direct manner, to the king's personal utility; the Trésor des Chartes only held documents that legitimized the king's power.

The Organization of Documents in the Archives Nationales

Legislators elicited nominations for the position of National Archivist soon after declaring the creation of the Archives of the National Assembly. On August 14, 1789, the legislature elected Armand-Gaston Camus, a Galican and native of Paris, born in 1740 to a Jansenist bourgeois family.⁴⁵ Camus practiced law for several years before representing the Third Estate in the 1787 congress of the Estates General, but avoided party factions.⁴⁶ He was also a well-known critic of privileges of the Old Regime.⁴⁷ Revolutionary loyalty and competency in leadership were the desired qualifications for candidates hoping to secure employment; Camus's background and reputation as a consistent and faithful revolutionary justifiably warranted his nomination as guardian of the nation's archival heritage.

Legislators officially assigned the duties of the National Archivist a year later with the law of September 12, 1790. The National Archivist would occupy a six-year term, eligible for reelection. He would oversee all operations relative to the Archives nationales, in addition to the acquisition and organization of records created during the Old Regime.⁴⁸ The most important of the archivist's responsibilities included the preservation, classification, and arrangement of documents, and the communication of records to and from the legislature or government officials.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Camus recognizes 14 August 1789 as the official vote for Camus as national archivist—a vote that has been inaccurately dated in the footnotes of other works. *AP Annexes* 1791 "L'état des Archives nationales."

⁴⁶ Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 31, no. 1 (January 1968), 24-26. Cited from Pierre Géraudel's "A.-G. Camus, Garde des Archives Nationales (1740-1804)." An unpublished thesis of which an abstract was published in Ecole Nationale des Chartes, *Positions des theses soutenues par les élèves de la promotion de 1942 pour obtenir de diplôme d'archiviste* (Nogent-Le-Rotrou, 1942), 61-67; Amédée Outrey, "Sur La Notion D'archives En France À La Fin Du Xviii Siècle," *Revue Historique du Droit Français et Étranger* (1953), 286.

⁴⁷ *AP Annexes* 1791 "L'état des Archives nationales;" Camus was also the author of the law of 31 July 1791 which called for the suppression of the titles of nobility. Favier, *Quinze Siècles*, 16.

⁴⁸ *AP*, 4 September, 1790.

⁴⁹ *AP* September 12, 1790, Legislators official passed the law on 12 September 1790, but see 4 and 7 September 1790 for the debates. Jennifer Milligan, "'What Is an Archive?' in the History of Modern France," *Archives Stories* (2005), 162.

Scholars have often interpreted the management of the Archives nationales under Camus as the rudimentary beginnings of an archival science, but Camus's system of arranging documents can also be interpreted merely as a manifestation of self-interest, driven by the desire to arrange papers for easy and efficient access. Camus filed assembly minutes into chronological order, arranged committee documents alphabetically by name, and sectioned archives into five categories to navigate through the Archives nationales with greater ease: Code A: "acts originating from the National Assembly," which held "acts directly relative to the formation and composition of the assembly" and included such papers as letters of convocation, election results of deputies, original minutes, and procès-verbaux of the séances; Code B: "acts addressed to the National Assembly," which contained memoirs and personal addresses to the legislative body; Code C: "books and objects," which cataloged books, stamps, and medallions given to the Assembly; Code D: "memoirs and journals" of deputies; and Code E: records produced by and relative to the committees.⁵⁰

Camus also designed a procedure for registering government documents received by the Archives nationales. Archivists made inventories of all incoming collections by dividing a sheet of paper into two columns—on the left-hand side they logged what came into the holdings; on the right, they noted the response or action taken, followed by a signature of who was responsible for cataloging that particular submission. Archivists generated these lists in monthly intervals or when a series of large deposits arrived in their possession.⁵¹

Workers at the Archives nationales continued to record all archival acquisitions in this manner throughout the Revolution. Historians look at especially detailed notes on the daily proceedings in the Archives owing to a journal kept for Camus during his three-year absence on mission with the Belgium army.⁵² Entries varied, but most often specified the

⁵⁰ AP *Annexes* 1791, "L'état des Archives nationales;" AB Va 2, "Rapport fait au nom des commissaires, vérification aux Archives (le citoyen Grégoire, Rapporteur), 10 Octobre 1792, l'an I de la République."

⁵¹ Legislators first situated the Archives nationales at Versailles, but then moved it to the Palais Justice after the Assembly returned to Paris. AB Va 2, "1 December 1792—3 January 1796, Le journal pendant l'absence et la captivité de Camus." See this for more detail on the numbers used to organize the documents (A1, subscript a, subscript 1, etc.); AB Va 4, "Project d'un plan de travail pour l'ordre et l'arrangement des Archives Nationales, soumis à la décision du Citoyen Camus Garde des archives nationales."

⁵² At the time of his capture by the Austrians in 1793, Camus was serving as deputy representative of the Haute-Loire on mission with the Belgium army. Jean-Ambroise Sylvain Mallet, an agent for the Agence Temporaire des Titres, substituted for Camus in his absence. Camus was released in June of 1795;

type of documents received by archivists and where collections were laid to rest. The information provided in this journal, alongside the inventories made in monthly intervals throughout the 1790s were items originally intended to guide the archivists and unfamiliar statesmen through the holdings of the Archives nationales, but later became useful tools in the filtering process carried out by the Agence Temporaire des Titres; these lists made known what documents the Archives nationales possessed, and consequently, what the government could then dispose of.⁵³

How Legislators Utilized Records Created by the Revolutionary Government

But before legislators pushed for the triage and subsequent destruction of Old Regime deposits in 1794, revolutionaries at the initial stages of records management concentrated predominantly on the organization of records created by the new state. During the years 1789 and 1791, archivists were busy designing and modifying methods of arranging documents they received from the National Assembly and its committees. The government existed in a state of symbiosis with the Archives nationales at this time; the influx of documents created by the new government gave strength to the Archives' bank of knowledge, while the internal organization of records in the Archives' holdings allowed officials access to information without substantial difficulties.⁵⁴ Camus confided to the Minister of the Interior his strategy of providing easy and constant access to information, under the conviction that legislators benefited from the efficient preservation of their administrative records. Legislators indeed identified records produced by the revolutionary state as credible and advantageous sources of information; documents allowed officials to survey the health, efficiency, and even the financial stability of the revolutionary state by analyzing the information yielded from their archives.⁵⁵ Committee records, account registers, and summary reports supplied evidence of the

legislators reelected him as National Archivist in 1796. We should also be mindful that Camus was absent when the National Convention passed the law of 7 *messidor* II. Faviers, *Quinze Siècles*, 19, 41-45; AB Va 2, "1 December 1792—3 January 1796, Le journal pendant l'absence et la captivité de Camus."

⁵³ This decree is one of many calls made by the National Assembly that required the publication of registers and inventories of the Archives nationales. AP 13 October 1791.

⁵⁴ State workers and agencies sent records to be cataloged in the Archives nationales addressed as such: "I send you, citizen Camus,..." or "I have the honor of sending you..." AB II 2; See AP 4 September 1790, 572-573 and AP 13 October 1791, 201 for decrees on the organization of the Archives nationales.

⁵⁵ AP 4 September 1790, 572-573 ; AB II 1, "1789-1792, Correspondance du Garde des Archives avec le Ministre de la Justice;" ABII 1, "1 July 1792, Administration Municipale des Contributions Directes."

government's achievements and shortcomings, and thus prompted discussions for the improvement of the state in the legislature.

Camus often encouraged legislators to use their archives as tools for reference, clarification, and evaluation.⁵⁶ Requests for meeting minutes, laws, registers, and summary reports appear as early as 1790, suggesting that Camus succeeded in his objective.⁵⁷ Individuals and agencies utilized the information provided by the Archives nationales, ranging from assembly deputies, to ministers of the interior, of finance, of marines and the colonies, and even state prosecutors.⁵⁸ Archivists would then use the inventories and catalogs they created in order to pinpoint the exact location of documents requested.

Early modern historian Bedos-Rezak links this revolutionary dependency on records with developments and practices that trace back well before the Revolution.⁵⁹ Bedos-Rezak examines the gradual movement from oral to written transmissions of information in early modern France, tracing how writing and record-keeping gradually became the dominant practices. She contends that "the act of making records was performed as a spectacle in medieval towns," which projected an image of the written word as a highly praised artifact worthy of ceremonial and political prestige.⁶⁰ By the early fifteenth-century, the people of France thus came to regard the written word as

⁵⁶ AB II 1, "1789-1792, Correspondance du Garde des Archives avec le Ministre de la Justice;" ABII 1, "1 July 1792, Administration Municipale des Contributions Directes."

⁵⁷ It is important to keep in mind that workers at the Archives nationales never sent original documents; they instead made copies. And so on top of their responsibilities to organize, inventory, and locate documents, archivists also had to produce duplicate records in a reasonable amount of time. AB II 1, "1789-1792, Correspondance du Garde des Archives avec le Ministre de la Justice."

⁵⁸ See AB II 1a and AB II 1b for requests to see documents sent by legislative deputies and bodies; state ministers (of the interior, of justice, of finance, of exterior relations, of war, of marines and the colonies, of general police); the general of brigade; general director of war and geography; and state prosecutors. This collection also contains letters requesting Camus to describe the condition and quality of certain deposits; letters telling Camus to send specified collections to other departments (such as the department of the National Domain); and letters informing Camus of records that he was to receive and to then organize into the Archives nationales. See AB II 2 for more requests to consult documents sent by the Council of 500; Executive Directory; different departments (deux Nêthes, Bas-Rhin, Saint-Etienne); various arrondissements; the Sénat-Conservateur; the *Tribun du peuple* (1800); the council of the state; the secretary of the state; the department of the national domain; the general administration of forests; and the general liquidation of the public debt. Letters ranged from the very specific (requesting a dated record or document written by a particular person) to the very vague (requests for a law, but without giving a date, requests for information on a topic of broad interest, requests for a document that might or might not exist).

⁵⁹ Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, "Civic Liturgies and Urban Records in Northern France, 1100-1400," in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 34-36.

⁶⁰ Bedos-Rezak, 42, 45.

valid, unfaltering, unalterable sources worthy of protection. And it is around this time that religious establishments, Bedos-Rezak argues, began to monopolize the drafting, transcription, and preservation of documents.⁶¹ The act of record-keeping also gave medieval communes a more structured approach to managing governmental affairs; later monarchs of the Old Regime and legislators of the new revolutionary state continued to rely on the uniformity and concreteness of the written word and to preserve records specific to their administrative affairs.⁶²

Legislators in 1790 gradually perceived documents, much like their predecessors, as constructive tools to enrich the state because they continually relied on records to yield information and to guide their actions. They valued records to such a great extent that they even installed iron cabinets in the Archives nationales to protect papers from fire and potential acts of vandalism.⁶³ They likewise guarded against further damage or loss by prohibiting the distribution of original documents.⁶⁴ Common to all revolutionaries was the belief that they had to ensure the safekeeping of their documents, even though the political agendas of legislators differed variably over the course of the Revolution.

Legislators also relied on records created by the state to guide them on matters of great judicial consequence. On one occasion in the spring of 1792, deputies assembled a committee to review letters of correspondence held in the Archives nationales between all administrative departments and a state employee, M. de Narbonne, when the integrity of his character and counsel to the army came into question.⁶⁵ Legislators ordered the committee to first consult documentary evidence of M. de Narbonne's affairs and then decide the proper course of action, be it a trial, dismissal of office, or a retraction of the negative claims issued against the individual under scrutiny.⁶⁶

How Legislators Utilized Records Created Under the Old Regime

Legislators placed more work on the Archives nationales by ordering the integration of the king's records, ecclesiastical deposits, and other diverse papers into the

⁶¹ Bedos-Rezak, 35.

⁶² Bedos-Rezak, 47.

⁶³ AP 13 October 1791.

⁶⁴ AP Annexes 1791 "L'état des Archives nationales" ordered by the decree of 30 November 1790.

⁶⁵ AP 31 March 1792, 21.

⁶⁶ I could not find the committee's verdict on M. Narbonne in the *Archives Parlementaires*.

Archives nationales.⁶⁷ Archivists had to accommodate the dramatic increase in the number, volume, type, and composition of deposits whose contents were virtually unknown.⁶⁸ They organized deposits of the Old Regime according to the system of arrangement outlined for documents created by revolutionary state.

Legislators predominantly relied on records of their own making, but they also discovered ways to profit from the confiscation and preservation of private papers, especially those of the émigrés. Documents created under the Old Regime assisted legislators in the examination of private citizens on trial, and particularly in the prosecution of many alleged counter-revolutionaries. Workers at the Archives nationales received a substantial number of private papers that accompanied the Old Regime deposits seized by the revolutionary government that started in 1790. On one occasion in May of that year, Camus received forty-one archival deposits of notable émigré families.⁶⁹ These records interested different departments in various ways; the Minister of the Marines and the Colonies kept papers relative to commerce abroad, the Minister of war accepted papers to help direct the fortification of state-wide defenses, the Minister of Finance received accounting records, and the office of the National Domain obtained titles to land and property.⁷⁰

The acquisition of private archives increased in 1793 and 1794 as the radical Jacobin faction accelerated the seizure of deposits. While political tensions accelerated into arbitrary violence and Terror, the Minister of the General Police kept collections of

⁶⁷ The king's papers were immediately absorbed by the revolutionary state upon the passing of the law of 12 September 1790, as were all ecclesiastic deposits after the state nationalized all church property in November of 1789. Revolutionaries also absorbed papers of hospitals and universities as each institution eventually became nationalized under the state jurisdiction. Lara Jennifer Moore, "Restoring Order: The Ecoles Des Chartes and the Organization of Archives and Libraries in France, 1820-1870" (Stanford University, 2001), 6.

⁶⁸ Palmer, 70.

⁶⁹ This deposit also held fifteen collections of the high clergy. ABVa2, "Etat des Cahiers qui sont être envoyés le 4 Mai 1790 par M. Camus pour verifier ces cahiers." Legible names of the families listed : Angoulame, Seine, Berry, Bordeaux, Bourboumoire, du Bugey, Chaloure Soumarne, Chartier, Chateau Thierry, Chammon , Clermom , Dijon, Douai, Dourdau, Evreuse, Limoge, au Tulle, Mame, Manter, Meureuse, Metz, Montargère, Nimour, Nevor , Sari, Seroune, Serigord, Querey, S. Augustin, Saumur, Sezanne.

⁷⁰ Agents also found pieces relative to the affairs of the king and procès-verbaux of the Assembly of Notables from 1787-1788. AB Vc 3, "Compte Rendu des membres du bureau du triage des titres (*section domaniale*), 1 ventôse - 1 prairial V (19 February 1797 to 20 May 1797);" AB II 2, "Les lettres du ministre des finances et de la Commission de l'intermédiaire de Comptabilité à l'archiviste national, concernant le département de la liquidation ont consulté les titres de bien-fonds considérants et les enregistrements statistiques des familles de émigrés en l'an III, IV, VII, VIII, VIII (1795, 1796, 1797, 1798, 1799)."

personal papers on file for immediate consultation. State prosecutors also referred to memoirs and correspondence of suspected enemies of the state in order to provide, or at least give the allusion of providing, concrete evidence of the individual's ill intentions towards the Republic.⁷¹ Revolutionary tribunals recognized written evidence as credible sources of information and so utilized, or arguably manipulated, records to "legally" condemn the accused individual to death.⁷²

The information provided by documents of both revolutionary and Old Regime origin demonstrate how legislators used records to satisfy the legal needs of the state over the course of the Revolution. Legislators certainly recognized early on the importance of keeping and maintaining records, as illustrated by their efforts to preserve the documents of the National Assembly just two weeks after the storming of the Bastille, and their later attempts to afford space in the Archives nationales for records created under the Old Regime. Documents during the Revolution had to deserve their preservation in the Archives nationales by offering some service to the state, such as aiding legislators in their evaluation of state officers or condemning counter-revolutionaries on trial. By referencing the documents in their holdings—whether of revolutionary or Old Regime origin—legislators in the early years of the Revolution granted the Archives nationales a certain degree of authority because they relied on documents to expose facts or "truths." It was a self-induced dependency on records to justify the actions of the state that would subsist throughout all the tumultuous changes of the Revolution. More importantly, it was a dependency that shaped the government's attitude towards archival evidence of feudal content in which revolutionaries, as a whole, viewed documents produced under the new state as credible and reliant sources, and those created under the Old Regime as either advantageous or threatening to the Revolution.⁷³

⁷¹ The Minister of the General Police requested Camus to send all original correspondence of certain émigrés to the criminal tribunal, since the high court required documents to authorize the denunciation of Parisian nobles on trial. The Minister provided names and date ranges to aid Camus in the retrieval of the records he requested. AB II 1a, "Correspondance du ministre de la police générale, 8 *germinal* IV (28 March 1796);" AB II 1b, "Correspondence de l'accusateur public, tribunal criminal au dépôt de la Seine, to Camus 29 *prairial* V."

⁷² AB Vc 3, "Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, *section juridique*, au citoyen Camus, représentative de la République et garde des Archives nationales, 1 *frimaire* V (21 november 1796)."

⁷³ AP 12 May 1792.

THE REVOLUTIONARY ASSAULT ON FEUDAL RECORDS AND THE LAW OF 7 *MESSIDOR* II

Legislators recognized the value of documenting and preserving their work within the first years of the Revolution; their perception of records as sources of important legal, fiscal, and historical content is evident by the state's consistent reliance on archival sources in daily proceedings. But as legislators sought ways to ensure the safekeeping of documents in the Archives nationales, feudal records in Paris and in the provinces were coming under attack by urban and rural demonstrators. The assault on feudal archives first materialized as an expression of the public's disapproval of the privileged aristocracy. Legislators in the National Convention began to mimic these public sentiments by authorizing the destruction of feudal documents in 1792 and 1793 as an ideological expression of the Revolution's political superiority over the Old Regime. All of these legislative efforts to erase feudal records culminated with the law of 7 *messidor* II and the creation of the Agence Temporaire des Titres.

This chapter draws upon information in the previous chapter by contrasting the revolutionaries' treatment of documents of their own making with those created under the Old Regime. It is important to look at the mentalities of persons directing the Archives nationales and the political, economic, and cultural environment at the time in order to explain why archival destruction mattered to revolutionaries. Hence, the goal of this chapter is to contextualize the developments of the Archives within the larger social, political, cultural environment of the late eighteenth-century in order to show how the law of 7 *messidor* II came into being. Scholars who address the destructive side of the Revolution's handling of records certainly mention the law of 1794, yet most often fail to recognize other laws that mandated archival destruction prior to the passing of 7 *messidor* II. It is therefore important to look at the laws mandating the destruction of feudal archives prior to 1794 and the debates that arose in order to understand the mindset of revolutionaries as political, economic, and social turmoil escalated.

The Popular Assault on Feudal Archives

The revolutionary appetite to destroy feudal titles manifested itself long before legislators authorized the triage of documents with the law of 7 *messidor* II in 1794. During the tumultuous period known as the Great Fear, archives, along with chateaux, weathervanes, and other symbols emblematic of French nobility, came under attack by the peasantry in 1789. In his classic examination of the Great Fear, Georges Lefebvre identified the destruction of records belonging to the aristocracy as a popular message of rebellion against the feudal system “that nobles were so anxious to maintain.”⁷⁴ The Revolution signaled to the poor rural community the dawn of a new age and a crippling of the nobility’s power. Archival records—regardless of their content—fell victim to popular assault by virtue of their position in the homes and offices of France’s elite families. These papers were vulnerable targets—most often secured only under lock and key—and were also one of the easiest items to transport and burn. Local peasants generally crowded the doors of their feudal lords’ castles in order to frighten their oppressors into submission; they forced nobles “to hand over their archives, pay back the fines they had collected, and formally disclaim all [their] rights.”⁷⁵ Peasants also acted in defiance by renouncing the feudal system and refusing to pay their seigneurial dues.⁷⁶

Urban crowds also began to assemble in the summer of 1789 in defiance of the Old Regime. The most famous example of archival destruction led by urban participants occurred on the first day of the Revolution. The storming of the Bastille and the release of its few prisoners are the most popular images recalled on July 14, 1789, but scholars often forget that participants also pillaged the Bastille’s archives. The deposits held at the archives of the Bastille contained significant registers of prisoners and *lettres de cachet* and “amounted to several hundred thousand...neatly copied, numbered, and docketed.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 94.

⁷⁵ Lefebvre, 42.

⁷⁶ Lefebvre, 94. An excerpt to further illustrate this idea: “they seem to have gathered by common consent with the intention of laying waste chateaux and houses and freeing themselves from their rents by burning their charters; one could add too that they were still stirred by the hatred the poor always feel towards the rich, indeed this hatred was even increased by the general state of over-excitement”, 119; For a more statistical analysis, see diagrams 5.2 and 8.3 in John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

⁷⁷ Friedrich Kircheisen, *The Grim Bastille*, trans. Arthur Chambers (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1930), 155. See also the introduction of Lara Jennifer Moore, “Restoring Order: The Ecoles Des Chartes and the Organization of Archives and Libraries in France, 1820-1870” (Stanford University, 2001).

According to Kircheisen, author of *The Grim Bastille*, “files were taken down from their places, burned, trampled under foot, or soiled...The inner court of the Bastille was strewn with scraps of paper, for the crowd simply threw everything out the windows.”⁷⁸ Other individuals secretly gathered records in hopes of selling them to collectors as historical markers of the feudal regime.⁷⁹ The storming of the Bastille, therefore, is one example of urban crowd activity that materialized as an expression of dissent against the Old Regime and, furthermore, a recognition of the legal and fiscal value of feudal documents.⁸⁰

Archivist and historian James O’Toole provides a symbolic explanation for why the public sought out feudal documents. He argues that archives exist as historical artifacts—physical objects inherently linked to the memory of their creators.⁸¹ “The possession of books and manuscripts,” he states, “was a sign of status.”⁸² And since the act of keeping records was often an exercise of noble privilege, the archives of noble families existed as physical representations of feudal privileges. Whereas peasants understood these documents as markers their “feudal servitude,” the urban population detested feudal records because of the privileges these documents awarded to the nobility.⁸³

O’Toole contends that the destruction of feudal records and the satisfaction felt by those “grinding them underfoot” had more to do with psychology and the symbolic destruction of feudal property than with the conscious erasing of a feudal lord’s legal,

⁷⁸ Kircheisen, 155-156.

⁷⁹ Kircheisen, 158.

⁸⁰ Other popular demonstrations held on the Champ de mars, Palais Royale, Place Vendôme, Tuileries, and Vincennes are examples that David Andress examines in the *Massacre on the Champ de Mars*. He investigates the gatherings of Parisian wage-earners during the first years of the Revolution in an effort to reveal a more “complex picture of social and political relations amongst the many groups who contested possession of the political arena in Paris.” His study accords agency and identity to participants who usually express their desires by collective action, not through written mediums like the literate and educated classes. Andress also highlights the disjuncture between the Revolution’s ideals of “liberty, equality, and social inclusion” and the subsequent marginalization of the urban public, as demonstrated by the “massacre at the Champ de Mars” where Paris National Guardsmen killed sixty demonstrators on July 17, 1791. David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ De Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2000), 2-3. Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 159.

⁸¹ James O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), 239.

⁸² O’Toole., 237.

⁸³ O’Toole equates destruction with disapproval. Therefore, titles of nobility symbolized “all that was wrong with the new regimes they were now overthrowing.” O’Toole, 254-255.

economic, and social power.⁸⁴ But examples of popularly-led assaults on feudal archives in *The Great Fear* illustrate that even the uneducated and illiterate population recognized written documents as the fundamental source of a lord's control over his estate; they decisively, not arbitrarily, sought to destroy the archives that validated the nobility's privileged rights. Historian John Markoff agrees with O'Toole that the act of assembling together, pillaging in brute force, and ritualistically burning the property of elites represented a symbolic rejection of the Old Regime identity. However, he acknowledges that the legal and economic function of feudal records instigated popular assaults. Feudalism, of course, represented more than just a symbolic or social edifice that ordinary men and women hoped to tear down; feudalism also represented legal and economic power. By destroying archives belonging to the privileged classes, crowds struck at the noble's capacity as lord, thereby impairing his ability to hold property or collect money.

Additionally, Markoff provides an assessment of popular archival destruction in a statistical analysis of "antiseigneurial events" that took place between 1788 and 1793. He estimates that the "searches, seizures, and demands for documents" at the residences of feudal lords or at the offices of notaries made up 16% of all antiseigneurial events, which qualified the attack on feudal archives as the most frequently sought after "honorific symbol of seigneurial status," exceeding attacks against weathervanes, coats-of-arms, gallows, turrets, or battlements.⁸⁵ Markoff provides a second table that traces the frequency of "titles seized or destroyed" in chronological perspective with events of the Revolution. Attacks on feudal titles escalated in number from zero to six in the period from March to June 1789, and peaked during the Great Fear from July to August, totaling twenty-nine reported assaults. Attacks in June of 1790 alone amounted to thirty-one, which probably gave rise to the law of 19 June 1790 which prohibited the public from destroying objects of the Old Regime. Attacks slowly decreased as the Revolution progressed, but rose again to nineteen from February to April 1792 as the rural population endured more food shortages and financial strains from the country's war against Austria. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that at times when the state

⁸⁴ O'Toole, 255.

⁸⁵ See Markoff, table 5.2.

authorized the public burning of feudal archives in May and July of 1792 and July, September, and October of 1793, popular attacks waned.⁸⁶

The Creation of the Revolutionary Identity at the Expense of the Old Regime: The Assault on Feudal Archives Spearheaded by the National Convention

Revolutionaries from 1789 to 1791 focused their attention predominantly on the records created by and relative to the revolutionary state, as demonstrated by their initial plans to maintain only those records created by the revolutionary state. Legislators considered these records to be important and valid sources of information. By contrast, however, legislators viewed documents of non-revolutionary origin through a biased lens, regarding certain feudal documents, such as titles to nobility and privilege, as superfluous and void of any legal, fiscal, or historical value.⁸⁷ Markoff observes the “denunciatory quality” that the word “feudal” in revolutionary times took on. The feudal past stood in opposition to revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality, and therefore restricted the progress of the nation.⁸⁸

Indeed, revolutionary leaders “tirelessly announced themselves and to others the existence of a clear rupture” with France’s feudal heritage by framing legislation to incite “a radical break with the past.”⁸⁹ But before legislators could mandate the destruction of feudal documents, they had to first discover, deduce, and define what it meant to be a “purely feudal” record.⁹⁰ The word “feudal” embodied several different meanings; it could signify a social order (the feudal regime) or principles of economic relations (the seigneurial system of rent and dues).⁹¹ Documents produced in the Old Regime could also represent the feudal system in various ways, taking the form of titles of nobility, office, and privilege, or genealogy charts which validated and transferred these rights to

⁸⁶ See Markoff, table 8.3: June 1788-February 28, 1789 (0 attacks); March-June 1789 (6 attacks); July 1-August 11, 1789 (29 attacks); August 12-December 31, 1789 (9 attacks); January 1-March 28, 1790 (12 attacks); March 29-May 31, 1790 (7 attacks); June 1-June 30, 1790 (31 attacks); July 1, 1790-May 31, 1791 (3 attacks); June 1-June 30, 1791 (10 attacks); July 1, 1791-January 31, 1792 (3 attacks); February 1-April 30, 1792 (19 attacks); May 1-August 25, 1792 (0 attacks); August 26-October 31, 1792 (0 attacks); November 1, 1792-June 30, 1793 (5 attacks).

⁸⁷ Jean and Lucie Favier, *Archives Nationales: Quinze Siècles D'histoire* (Paris: Nathan, 1988), 22.

⁸⁸ John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 524.

⁸⁹ Markoff, 525, 518.

⁹⁰ Markoff, 581.

⁹¹ Markoff, 516.

nobility, office, and privilege. But revolutionaries grew increasingly more concerned with feudal records that offered financial utility to the state, such as titles to land and property.

The assault on feudal documents by rural and urban participants illustrates that the uneducated public understood the power of their actions to limit or erase entirely the claim of nobles to their property and privileges. But archival destruction signified only one way in which crowds made their demands and grievances known during the Revolution and throughout French history. Historian Charles Tilly examines over four centuries of popular struggle and paints a portrait of mass gatherings that discounts previous interpretations of the people as “passive, unmobilized, uninvolved with politics.”⁹² He instead argues that crowd participants were active agents who wanted their voices to be heard and their concerns met. And so Tilly incorporates the popular destruction of Old Regime objects that took place during the Revolution in a continuum of riots of past and preceding centuries. The same can be argued for legislators who witnessed the Great Fear, the storming of the Bastille, and other similar demonstrations; they, too, associated these events with the popular bread and tax riots of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries and sought ways to settle the present social turmoil.

Legislators responded to popular assaults on feudal objects in 1790 by prohibiting the public destruction of private property in hopes of deterring excessive violence observed in previous episodes of social unrest.⁹³ They instead channeled the feverish spirit of the people into patriotic revolutionary celebrations.⁹⁴ Mona Ozouf investigates the construction of an emerging revolutionary culture by analyzing festivals and ceremonies staged by the government. Ozouf argues that festivals forged new bonds between the government and the nation by “inaugurating new sense of time, space, and social hierarchy” that reflected revolutionary ideals.⁹⁵ The Festival of the Supreme Being was one attempt to bolster “the nation’s spiritual unity and adherence to revolutionary

⁹² Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French : Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University 1986), 23, 75.

⁹³ AP 19 June 1790.

⁹⁴ See Yves-Marie Bercé, *History of the Peasant Revolts: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern France*, trans. Amanda Whitmore (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990) and Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹⁵ Lynn Hunt, "The French Revolution in Culture: New Approaches and Perspectives," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22, no. 3 (1989), 298.

principles”⁹⁶ She likewise contends that objects of the Revolution “became idolized through ritual,” whereas markers of the Old Regime past became objects of disgust since they stood in complete contrast with the revolutionary present.⁹⁷

The government also incorporated the destruction of feudal archives into these celebratory performances. Popular assaults on records subsided as the government began to authorize the destruction of feudal documents as part of a larger campaign against the Old Regime. The National Convention mandated for the public burning of titles to abolished feudal privileges on 12 May 1792, 19 June 1792, and 13 July 1793. On 10 August 1793, in commemoration of the fall of the monarchy in the previous year, legislators decreed that each commune would supervise the burning of feudal titles to nobility and privilege. Any person found thereafter with feudal titles to abolished rights in their custody could risk three to five years in iron.⁹⁸ Citizens of Reims gathered in the central square to celebrate as the law commanded on 10 August 1793. After singing “Sacred Love of the Fatherland,” a patriotic song of the new Republic, “the president citizen of the district read a feudal title...then proceeded to throw it into the flames with other things of the like.”⁹⁹ The crowd cheered as feudal documents burned in tribute to the Revolution’s victory over feudalism. Performances of revolutionary patriotism, in combination with the burning of feudal objects, clearly served as a means to express “the extent of one’s hatred of the Old Regime and, conversely, one’s devotion to the Republic.”¹⁰⁰

Historian Lynn Hunt also interpreted the Revolution as a conscious and concerted effort to eliminate all “symbolic connections” to the Old Regime. In her book, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Hunt examines the language of revolutionaries, insisting that their rhetoric drove the public to make “a complete break with the past,” to call all customs of the Old Regime into question, and to accept a new

⁹⁶ Popkin, 91.

⁹⁷ David Morgan, "The Vicissitudes of Seeing: Iconoclasm and Idolatry," *Religion* 33 (2003), 176.

⁹⁸ A reiteration of the decree appears on 17 July 1793. *AP* 13 July 1793; Gautherot, “Les Destructures des Archives,” 455.

⁹⁹ Dominique Poulot, "Surveiller Et S'instruire " in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1996), 261.

¹⁰⁰ Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 59 (Winter 1996), 35.

democratic identity.¹⁰¹ The destruction of feudal archives, in this respect, represents a symbolic shedding of the Old Regime identity and embrace of the new Revolutionary present—a cathartic release from feudalism in support of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*.

Historian Alfred Fierro expands upon this process of creating a revolutionary identity at the expense of the Old Regime by characterizing the destruction of Old Regime symbols “a purifying explosion from feudalism” led exclusively by the Jacobins.¹⁰² The Jacobin state heightened the distinction between the revolutionary and Old Regime governments by waging an aggressive campaign to dismantle, destroy, remove or rename *all* physical objects of the Old Regime. Archives, churches, chateaux, and statues of former kings make up a short list of objects assaulted by the National Convention.¹⁰³ Even the insignia of the Archives nationales underwent change. On September 22, 1792, two days after the National Convention declared France a Republic, legislators recommended the creation of a new seal for all administrative offices and institutions to replace the King’s monograph. The Archives nationales would instead bear the seal of “a woman supporting in one hand a beam and holding in the other a lance.”¹⁰⁴

Although changes in names and appearances stand out as the most prominent ideological transformations from the Old Regime to revolutionary state, internal administrative changes taking place within the government are also worthy of note. Tilly reminds readers that revolutionaries not only restructured the physical identity of the nation, but they also changed the internal framework of the state by establishing new

¹⁰¹ Hunt also contends along the same veins as Ozouf that the revolutionary state had to express its power and supremacy over the Old regime through symbolic practices. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1984), 54-56.

¹⁰² Alfred Fierro, "La Révolution Et Paris," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructures, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 29. B. De Andia, Another contributor to the same collection, defines the revolutionary process of erasing symbols of the Old Regime as a three step approach, characterized by the effort to “accelerate the struggle against the royalty,” “assure the elimination of religion in the name of the Lumières, and “destroy luxury in the name of warlike valeurs.” Therefore, legislators recognized the association and interconnection between the king, church, and nobility as integral parts of this framework of Old Regime feudalism. Béatrice De Andia, "De La Création Artistique Au Patrimoine," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructures, Créations, Mutations* ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 22.

¹⁰³ The year 1791 : attacks on Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Pierre des Arcis et de la Madeleine, les Minimes, Saint-Josse, Saint-Nicolas du Louvre; 1792: attacks on Notre Dame, Saint-Etienne des Grès, Saint-Benoit; 1793: all statues of former French kings destroyed, except the pedestrian statue of Louis XIV at Hotel-de-Ville. Fierro, 31.

¹⁰⁴ AB I 1, message sent to the National Printer du Louvre entitled “Changements aux cachets des archives de la République et de tous les corps administratifs.”

committees, militias, provisional governments, imposing uniform principles of taxation, conscription, voting, and modifying whole institutions to meet the demands of the nation. The Archives nationales, therefore, is one example of this larger administrative campaign to redesign the revolutionary state.¹⁰⁵

Yves-Marie Bercé is another historian to redirect our attention by pointing out that these public commemorations of revolutionary values, virtues, and accomplishments were in fact traditions of celebratory performance rooted in the Old Regime. The king sponsored festivals to celebrate the victories of his armies, royal births, the arrival of significant statesmen or foreign travelers, and the inauguration of statues, chateaux, theaters, and public spaces.¹⁰⁶ On one occasion, Bercé describes a scene that took place under the Old Regime that is of strikingly similarity to the celebrations observed during the Revolution: the citizens of a commune would parade down to the main plaza, accompanied “by bands of fiddlers and an escort of paupers...Bonfires were lit and the citizens danced in the squares.”¹⁰⁷ Bercé identifies the festivals promoted by the revolutionary state as part of a shared heritage with the Old Regime, since the central purpose of these commemorative festivals was to communicate a message to the public from above and to increase support for the government.¹⁰⁸ But while the actions of participants appear similar, participation in festivals and demonstrations was by far at its greatest in support the revolutionary state.

Historian Gustave Gautherot also links the Jacobin destruction of Old Regime records to other episodes of state-sponsored destruction in French history, such as the erasing of pagan symbols during the rise of Christianity, the attack on Catholic churches during the Reformation, or the burning of *mauvais* books by the Church and government during the Enlightenment.¹⁰⁹ Demolition of this kind, according to Gautherot, is simply another example of “administrative destruction”—a tradition exercised by the new state

¹⁰⁵ Tilly, 288.

¹⁰⁶ The church also led festivals in celebration of church holidays, the inauguration of new local bishops, or the passing of religious notables. Bercé, 22-23. See also Alain-Charles Gruber, *Les Grandes Fêtes et leurs Décors à l'époque de Louis XVI* (Genève: Libraire Droz, 1972) for an extensive chronological catalog of festivals from 1763 to 1790.

¹⁰⁷ Bercé, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 49.

¹⁰⁹ Gautherot, *Le Vandalisme Jacobin*, 2.

to validate their supremacy that historians witness in major political and social shifts preceding the Revolution. Each of these episodes of destruction are driven by the objectives to rid society of all symbols of the former state and to validate the supremacy of the political authority and ideology of the new order. And so the burning of feudal titles to privilege not only destroyed the nobility's claim to privilege and power, it also continued a long-standing tradition carried out by the church and state in centuries prior to 1789. Revolutionaries, therefore, turned the technique of destroying artifacts of the former regime onto the Old Regime state—arguably, a distorted way of embracing the practices of the Old Regime.

The Assault on Feudal Archives as Acts of Revolutionary Vandalism

While it is important to acknowledge the similarities between the Revolution and Old Regime, we must not let continuities overshadow the undeniable changes and innovations that materialized under the revolutionary state. The destruction of Old Regime symbols between 1789 and 1793 prompted the creation of a new word—"vandalism." The Abbé Grégoire created and first used "vandalism" on 21 *nivôse* II (10 January 1794) during an assessment of the revolutionary state.¹¹⁰ He coined the word to explain the destruction, desecration, and violent exploitations carried out by groups and individuals upon symbols of the Old Regime. Grégoire was notable Catholic priest and revolutionary leader; he was also an advocate of archival preservation, believing that the remnants of the Old Regime should be preserved for their historical value.¹¹¹ Grégoire sought to prohibit, or at least limit, the destruction of feudal documents, claiming that regardless of their content, feudal records are part of a "common heritage" because they provide information for a better understanding of past events and customs.¹¹² He valued the inherent link between records created by the present state and those created under the Old Regime and likewise regarded history as a sum of France's experiences, both good and bad.

¹¹⁰ Michel Beurdeley, "Le Vandalisme Révolutionnaire," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructures, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 108.

¹¹¹ Beurdeley, 108.

¹¹² Moore, 9.

Historian Michel Beurdeley expands on Grégoire's concise definition of "vandalism" by broadening the character of revolutionary vandalism into five categories: acts against the monarchy, acts against feudalism, acts against the church, acts of pure terrorism, and acts motivated by personal interest, such as financial opportunity.¹¹³ He argues that vandalism against markers of feudalism "manifested itself since August 1789 at the moment when the 'Great Fear' took hold of France," which gives the impression that vandalism was an exercise of the people, acting en masse and without restraint.¹¹⁴

But other French authors recognize that vandalism took place at the hands of legislators as well.¹¹⁵ Albert Souchal provides a comprehensive thematic description of the revolutionary assault upon objects and institutions of the Old Regime in *Le Vandalisme de la Révolution*. He argues that revolutionary vandalism presents historians with two faces—the image of popular insurrection, characterized by "the instinct of brutal destruction" and the more diplomatic, legislative approach, known as "the systematic and conscious demolition by sectarian ideology."¹¹⁶ Souchal emphasizes, more so than other authors, the interpretation that legislators under the Jacobin state in 1793 and 1794 were eager to purge symbols of the Old Regime after a rising surge of counterrevolutionary activity in the Vendée forced revolutionaries to recognize the possibility of a return to feudalism. He identifies revolutionary policies as premeditated and preemptive acts of vandalism "intended to erase the 'signs' of feudalism" and to display the power of the new state in order to thwart any possible attempts to overthrow the government.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Beurdeley, 108.

¹¹⁴ Beurdeley, 117.

¹¹⁵ For modern work on revolutionary vandalism, see *Révolution Française Et "Vandalisme Révolutionnaire": Actes Du Colloque International De Clermont-Ferrand 15-17 Decembre 1988*, ed. Marie-Claude Chemin Simone Bernard-Griffiths, Jean Ehrard (Paris: Universitas, 1992); Emmet Kennedy, "Vandalism and Conservation," in *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); François Souchal, *Le Vandalisme De La Révolution* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1993); Moore's dissertation and footnotes on the Storming of the Bastille, 15-17; and Edgard Boutaric, *Le Vandalisme Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Editions du Trident, 1989).

¹¹⁶ François Souchal, *Le vandalisme révolutionnaire*. Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1993), 18.

¹¹⁷ Souchal, 10, 17-18.

Legislative Efforts to Protect Private Property from Popular Violence

Although Souchal stresses that both the revolutionary government and popular crowds were in a shared opposition against France's feudal tradition, we must be mindful of the distinction between popularly-led and government-sponsored destruction of feudal archives. According to Souchal, vandalism targeted at markers of the Old Regime constituted an act of participatory revolutionary activity or civisme to the same effect as celebratory demonstrations in commemoration of the Revolution.¹¹⁸ But in fact, legislators across the Revolution criticized vandalism and the unauthorized destruction of feudal documents. The unrestrained desire of the people to avenge past injustices posed an immediate threat to what some government officials described as "precious monuments of history, the sciences, and the arts."¹¹⁹ Above all, legislators in the first years of the Revolution argued that public vandalism and violence represented an urgent threat to property holders and incited questions about the state's ability to protect the rights of its citizens to manage their own goods.

In the wake of the Great Fear and fall of the Bastille, legislators were aware of the threat to property because they too were property holders and often heard pleas from noble families to stop popularly-led attacks against their properties in the countryside.¹²⁰ Legislators started to fear the precedent that might result if rural and urban crowds continued to disrespect and damage the property of others, even the property of the nobility. The threat of anarchy thus forced legislators to resolve two problems: extinguish popular revolts and protect private property rights. On June 19, 1790, with churches and private property still under assault a year after the violence of the Great Fear subsided, legislators passed a decree which prohibited citizens from attacking "monuments placed in churches, charters, titles, and other documents concerning families or property, or the

¹¹⁸ Souchal, 12.

¹¹⁹ *AP* 19 June 1790.

¹²⁰ Legislators heard from Monsieur de Grosbois, a noble in the provinces, who called attention to the destructive nature of revolutionary participants. Disturbed by the public's propensity for excess, Grosbois implored "the king and the National Assembly to provide, in the most prompt means possible, a stop to the disorders that afflict the provinces, such as the demolitions of chateaus, fires of public repositories and special archives....," coincidentally just moments before legislators voted to create an archival repository for the National Assembly. *AP* 29 July 1789, 296-297; Comte de Germiny on 20 August 1789 asked legislators if they "can ever assess and prove the damage which [the pillagers] have done to [his] properties?" and demanded that the state provide compensation for his losses. Jocelyn Hunt, *The French Revolution* (New York Routledge, 1998), 26.

documents in any public or private place.”¹²¹ On the very next day, June 20, 1790, the National Assembly reiterated its message to the public that “no person is allowed to make an attempt upon monuments.”¹²²

In September of that year, legislators ordered the consolidation of all five archival deposits of the Trésor des Chartes into one location under the supervision of the National Archivist.¹²³ It is important to recognize that the government only authorized the unification of deposits, not the destruction of records, with the passing of this law. Legislators sought to prevent the damage or loss of documents of significant legal, fiscal, and historical value to the state. Yet, by assuming legal responsibility to shelter these feudal documents from public attacks, the state likewise reserved the right to determine what records will be kept and discarded.

The First Law Mandating the Destruction of Feudal Records:

The Law of 12 May 1792

The legislative push to destroy feudal archives began on 12 May 1792, shortly after France declared war on Austria. Legislators at the time engaged in a debate over the private papers of émigré families held in the convent of the Augustins. Minister of the Interior Jean-Marie Roland, a leading Girondin and husband of Madame Roland, proposed the destruction of records that perpetuate “the emblems of vanity and pride” in these deposits, referring specifically to titles of nobility.¹²⁴ According to Roland, select documents, such as titles to land and property, could aide the government in acquiring property for the national domain. He therefore made the distinction between “documents that could be useful to the state and should be brought into their holdings” and those that

¹²¹ AP 19 June 1790, 378.

¹²² AP 20 June 1790, 22; Gustave Gautherot, *Le Vandalisme Jacobin: Dstructions Administratives D'archives, D'objects D'art, De Monuments Religieux À L'époque Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1914), 21.

¹²³ "Un Épisode Mal Connu De L'histoire Des Archives Nationales: La Tentative De Mise En Application, Par Danton Du Décret Du 7 Août 1790 Sur La Réunion Des Archives Du Conseil," *Revue Historique du Droit Français et Étranger* (1958), 530-531; AP 12 August 1790.

¹²⁴ AP 12 May 1792, 274-275. While Roland advocates for archival destruction, he is praised for safeguarding the contents of the national museum and library in Bette W. Oliver's *From Royal to National: The Louvre Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale*, (Lexington Books, 2007).

should be regarded as a threat.¹²⁵ Roland's ambivalent attitude towards feudal archives is characteristic of the dominant perception held in the legislature. To the majority of revolutionaries, artifacts of feudal vanity, pride, and privilege did not warrant place or legal stature in the new state. But feudal titles to land and property were highly desired commodities. And so depending on the content of the feudal record and the interests of the state, papers formerly belonging to émigrés existed as both an advantage and threat to the revolutionary government.

A Montagnard lawyer by the name of Jean-François Delacroix followed Roland's address and pushed for a more extreme remedy.¹²⁶ He called for the burning of *all* feudal documents, regardless of their contribution to the Republic. Delacroix's recommendation illustrates another commonly held sentiment held by legislators—fear and anxiety of the possible downfall of the revolutionary state.¹²⁷ The conservation of titles of feudal origin, he stated, be it to land or privilege, will “perpetuate the hope of the counter-revolutionaries.”¹²⁸ Legislators who shared Delacroix's anxiety believed that émigrés would refer to their property titles upon their return from exile and consequently reclaim their goods which the government confiscated in their absence.

Delacroix pushed the threat of counter-revolutionaries to motivate legislators into an preemptive strike. The destruction of feudal titles to property and privilege would ensure that enemies of the Revolution could never reinstate their power if indeed the Revolution fell. But other deputies argued that titles of nobility were invalidated since the

¹²⁵ While Roland's argument brings forth the notion that Old Regime documents could be of some legal and financial interest to the state, we must be cautious of our interpretation because Roland is not proposing to create a means of sorting feudal archives between “useful” and “useless” at this time; the discussion of triage does not appear until the session of 7 *messidor* II in 1794. Instead, he presents an argument that questions the rationality and practicality of condemning *all* documents of the Old Regime. *AP* 12 May 1792, 274.

¹²⁶ M. . Hoefler, *Nouvelle Biographie Générale Depuis Les Temps Les Plus Reculés Jusqu'à Nos Jours : Avec Les Renseignements Bibliographiques Et L'indication Des Sources À Consulter*, vol. 28 (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1855-1866), 583.

¹²⁷ François Furet and Darrin McMahon underscore this idea of revolutionary conspiracy and how legislators used “aristocracy” or “counter-revolutionaries” as the blanket term for all perceived enemies of the Revolution. See Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Bordier ; , *Les Archives De La France Ou Histoire Des Archives De L'empire, Des Archives Des Ministères, Des Communes, Des Hôpitaux, Des Greffes, Des Notaires, Etc., Contenant L'inventaire D'une Partie De Ces Dépôts* (Paris: 1855), 18.

¹²⁸ *AP* 12 May 1792, 274.

night of August 4, 1789, thus abrogating the rights of the émigrés to reclaim their property.¹²⁹ Those in opposition to Delacroix therefore concluded that the assembly did not run a risk by allowing these records to remain in circulation. There was no urgency for their destruction.¹³⁰

The Debates of 12 May 1792 in Wider Perspective: The Issue of Property

While Roland and Delacroix both championed some measure of archival destruction, their diverging opinions on the fate of feudal titles to land and property is characteristic of the central point of contention between the Montagnards and Girondins—the two main groups that formed during the Legislative Assembly and whose party factions split the National Convention.¹³¹ Roland and his fellow Girondin supporters believed it was the government’s duty to protect the rights of individuals to maintain and manage their property, whereas Delacroix, a Montagnard in partnership with Marat, Robespierre, Danton, and Camille Desmoulins, proclaimed a closer alliance with the common people and a desire to erase vestiges of the Old Regime, and so pushed for a harsher judgment than the Girondins on the protection of émigré property.¹³² The Girondins defended the inviolability of property ownership that legislators guaranteed in article seventeen of the Declaration of the Rights of Man.¹³³ The Montagnards, however, discounted the legal standing of feudal titles to land and property in the revolutionary state. The Montagnards gained control of the government after a successful coup d’état against the Girondins in the National Convention that lasted from May 31, 1793 to June 2, 1793. On February 26, 1794 (8 *ventôse* II), at the urging of Saint-Just, legislators voted

¹²⁹ *AP* 12 May 1792, 274-275.

¹³⁰ *AP* 12 May 1792, 274.

¹³¹ Popkin, 74.

¹³² The Girondins generally represented middle-class urban revolutionaries, supported the war effort against other European dynasties, and voted against the execution of the king. By no means considered moderates, the Girondins however were less radical than their Montagnard counterparts. The Montagnard, who controlled the Jacobin Club and who associate closely with the sans-culottes, championed the execution of the king and were more prone to violent, radical policies. Popkin, 74.

¹³³ Article 17 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man: “Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and on the condition of a just compensation in advance.” *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, trans. Lynn Hunt (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996).

for the distribution of confiscated émigré property to impoverished patriots, signaling that the Jacobin state did not honor any émigré claims to land or property.¹³⁴

Delacroix's push to destroy feudal documents in 1792 reminds us that the revolutionary government faced ongoing political instability that made the security of the Revolution uncertain.¹³⁵ But Roland also brings an important issue to the forefront; legislators could use certain feudal records to improve the financial stability of the state and to bring to an end to counter-revolutionary aggression. The nationalization of church property in November of 1789 is the first example to illustrate how the state was in urgent need of financial resources. It also demonstrates how revolutionaries identified fiscal inadequacies as the major force that led to the eventual collapse of the Old Regime. They hoped to sell the property formerly belonging to the church in order to prevent the bankruptcy of the new state.¹³⁶ But these sessions on the nationalization of church property were not without debate.¹³⁷ On one side, legislators identified the nationalization of ecclesiastical lands as a form of legalized confiscation and argued that the state must recognize the right of the church to keep and maintain their own properties. Other delegates contended that the nationalization of church property will help the state pay off the debts accrued by the Old Regime and will provide a substantial form of income to avoid the fiscal failures that their predecessors succumbed to.¹³⁸

The Debates of 12 May 1792 in Wider Perspective: Advocates of Archival Preservation

¹³⁴ Popkin, 88.

¹³⁵ 1793 proved to be an especially crucial year of concern for legislators, when in March, counterrevolutionaries in the Vendée began to revolt, and in June, when federalists also began to rise against the Convention. Popkin, 160.

¹³⁶ The deposit of St. Esprit, which held a considerably large deposit of ecclesiastical archives, was the first holding sorted through by the Agence Temporaire des Titres in an effort to find titles to church land and property." AB Va 3, "L'agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 nivose IV (3 January 1796)."

¹³⁷ Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789, and the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 69.

¹³⁸ Delegates in July of 1790 resumed the debate on ecclesiastical property, arguing that archival deposits of churches and convents absorbed by the state should be returned to their former proprietors. Other legislators responded by claiming that ecclesiastical archives belong to the state in the same respect as land and buildings are considered nationalized property and so the deposits must remain in the government's custody. AP 1 July 1790, 591.

While most deputies in the session of May 1792 pushed for archival destruction, a minority rejected the idea altogether. One deputy, M. Dehaussy-Robecourt, expressed his belief that feudal records should be kept because they contained a historical significance in their own right.¹³⁹ He argued for the protection of feudal documents by appealing to the sanctity of France's shared heritage, believing that many of these documents gave shape and character to French history. Another deputy, M. Mulot, followed in support of the preservation of these titles. "There are many pieces, in these monuments of pride, that contain essential facts of history," he stated, "and it is necessary to consider that these titles are precious for the study of genealogy."¹⁴⁰

The concept of sanctifying French history was a compelling argument used by advocates of both archival preservation and destruction. Legislators on both sides of the debate shared the "desire to conserve all that was truly historic" and championed their cause for the sake of sanctifying French history.¹⁴¹ But the majority of legislators in the session of 12 May 1792 voted in favor of archival destruction. The state was to discard all records "formerly pertaining to chivalry and the nobility" held in the covenant of the Augustins and to preserve only those documents of legal and financial utility to the state.¹⁴² The state carried out this law in June of 1792, where books, tapestries, charters, and an estimated six hundred volumes of noble genealogy were burned in the Place Vendôme—at the feet of Louis XIV's statue.¹⁴³

Deputies who supported archival preservation in the session of 1792 represented a small number of revolutionaries who understood the historical implications of destroying feudal documents at the start of a growing radical faction in the legislature. But advocates of archival preservation can also be seen as early as 1790. Prior to serving as National Archivist under Napoléon Bonaparte, Pierre Daunou promoted educational reform policies in light of the great political and historical transformations of his country.

¹³⁹ M. Dehaussy-Robecourt also requested for the making of inventories for those documents destroyed out of the necessity to protect the state, at least to acknowledge evidence of the papers' existence, but legislators did not decree for the making of such lists. *AP* 12 May 1792, 274.

¹⁴⁰ *AP* 12 May 1792, 275.

¹⁴¹ Bordier, 12.

¹⁴² No vote count included in the *Archives Parlementaires*. Records only state that "the majority voted" for archival destruction. *AP* 12 May 1792, 275.

¹⁴³ Gautherot *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 460; Bordier, 1; Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 31, no. 1 (January 1968), 30.

Daunou stressed the importance of using education to promote civic virtue and proposed a means of preparing the “the generations the fatherland” by teaching the present society about France’s past triumphs and failures.¹⁴⁴ Thus, history could be used to reinforce an understanding of France’s glory, liberty, and laws.¹⁴⁵ But while Daunou recommended that educators teach history in all grade levels, with particular emphasis on Greek, Roman, and French history, he did not describe a rule specifying how the feudal past should be represented or interpreted. However, he did encourage the teaching of France’s past outside the classroom—in the form of national festivals.¹⁴⁶ “Not only should these communal celebrations stir patriotism in the Revolutionary government,” Daunou stated, they were meant to showcase the talents and glories of France, “the riches of the population, of industry and of the arts,” while at the same time, reminding the people of “the abuses that had so long oppressed, the abolition of privileges, of orders, of royalty...”¹⁴⁷

Abbé Grégoire also promoted the preservation of feudal titles during a report given in response to the session of 12 May 1792 and the state’s most recent mandate for archival destruction, which called for the burning of “all titles and genealogies that are to be found in public deposits.”¹⁴⁸ Grégoire voiced his belief that feudal records offered invaluable information about the dualities and contradictions of the Old Regime; these documents not only provided insight on the privileged “customs of their ancestors,” but also on the “history of the misfortune of the people.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, Grégoire identified feudal titles to nobility as historically valuable objects for their informative value and their ability to project an educational, but nevertheless negative portrait of the Old Regime.¹⁵⁰

On 19 June 1792

¹⁴⁴ According to Daunou and his supporters, education in the new revolutionary state would serve three purposes: teach “principles of morality,” “historic traits,” and “the bases of the French constitution.” Pierre-Claude-François Daunou, *Plan D’éducation Présenté À L’assemblée Nationale, Au Nom Des Instituteurs Publics De L’oratoire (1790)* (Paris: Hachette, 1976), 1, 9.

¹⁴⁵ Daunou, *Plan D’éducation*, 2-4.

¹⁴⁶ Pierre-Claude-François Daunou, *Essaie Sur L’instruction Publique (1793)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1995), 4.

¹⁴⁷ Daunou, *Essaie*, 5, 9.

¹⁴⁸ This second mandate took place on 19 June 1792. See AP 19 June 1792, 377.

¹⁴⁹ AB Va 2, “Rapport fait au nom des commissaires, vérification aux Archives (le citoyen Grégoire, Rapporteur), 10 Octobre 1792, l’an I de la République.”

¹⁵⁰ AB Va 2, “Rapport fait au nom des commissaires, vérification aux Archives (le citoyen Grégoire, Rapporteur), 10 Octobre 1792, l’an I de la République.”

On July 13, 1793, the same day Charlotte Corday assassinated radical leader and journalist Jean-Paul Marat, another member of the National Convention, M. Levasseur, reiterated the call to destroy feudal titles. He declared “it necessary to cut down [feudalism’s] roots, to burn and throw its ashes to the wind.”¹⁵¹ Legislators heeded Levasseur’s recommendation and ordered the delivery of all titles to abolished feudal rights to municipal government officials for immediate disposal. But before legislators authorized this decree, they first heard from a citizen by the name of Poirier, who rebutted the proposal to destroy feudal archives. Poirier valued feudal documents because he valued these records for giving shape to the present’s understanding of the past¹⁵²:

They hold relative to history, to manners, and to the customs of the centuries that preceded us, to dates, to geography and to the topography of France, to the glossary of our ancient language, to paleontology, and to diplomacy, to the price of food,...to weights and measures, to commerce, to agriculture, and to the arts; to objects upon which clarification can be obtained.¹⁵³

And like Grégoire, Poirier also tried to elicit support from legislators who wished to project a negative image of the Old Regime by suggesting that feudal titles served as a valuable reminder of the once irrational, vane, and abhorrent ways of life under the feudal regime:

It is true that we will find there sometimes revolting and absurd traits and of the bizarreness of the feudal institutions, like the degradation that reduced the human species;

¹⁵¹ AP 13 July 1793.

¹⁵² Poirier also argued that feudal documents should be kept because of their “ancientness,” given that some titles to land and privilege dating back two to three centuries. The argument for keeping titles because of their age appears in other reports. One untitled and unauthored document suggested that papers of one émigré family confiscated by the state should be kept because the collections illustrated the “work of five successive generations of this family.” See AB Vc 3, “Notification sur les travaux de manuscrit de la famille d’Argenson, dont sous le bureau des domaines nationaux comme affaires des émigrés, l’an V.”

¹⁵³ “It is equally necessary,” Poirier continues, “to conserve for history, the titles of foundation of different religious orders..., their statues,...the titles relative to the consecrated establishments to the relief of humanity, the titles...concerning war and changing of dynasties,...who can provide knowledge of the spirit, the character and the manners of inhabitants, the costumes, the usage, practices and religious ceremonies.” AB Va 3, “Project du Citoyen Poirier, du jeudi 25 juillet 1793 aux citoyens composans le comité d’instruction publique.” Similar sentiments expressed in AB Vc 3, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf departments réunis, Germinal VI (May/April 1798).”

but far from deciding the suppression of these documents, it appears we are more driven to make an exception of them. These monuments conserved by the Convention will make an attempt to show posterity what [the Revolution] has done to humankind in cutting off the last leg of one so monstrous of an institution.¹⁵⁴

Underling Poirier's argument is the assumption that the record of history cannot be bad—that no matter what image or memory a document recalls of the past, the record can be used to serve some benefit for the present generation, especially as a means to deter the Republic from following the same irrational path which led to the downfall of the Old Regime. Poirier recognized that legislators wanted to destroy the memory of feudal vanity and pride, but he also understood that without proof of the inadequacies of the Old Regime there would be no means to illustrate the conditions that brought the Revolution into existence.

And so the argument once used by those in favor of archival destruction—that titles to abolished feudal rights reminded France of her abhorrent past and so must be erased—was turned on its head in support of archival preservation. Legislators in favor of preserving feudal archives did so because they realized that the Revolution materialized in response to the inadequacies and injustices of the Old Regime. Feudal documents once considered destined for annihilation could actually be used to the advantage of the state if legislators employed these documents to elevate the glory and accomplishments of the Revolution; the information yielded by feudal titles could be used to write a history that would warn the people to avoid the pitfalls of the past, while simultaneously illustrating how the Revolution successfully conquered the Old Regime. Therefore, preservation of feudal documents did not damage or taint the Revolution, but instead enhanced its image.

Arguments in support of archival preservation, however, declined altogether as the National Convention grew increasingly more radical. In September of 1793, two weeks after Robespierre declared terror as “the order of the day,” legislators authorized the Minister of Justice to destroy the sixty-four registers of the former secretaries of the

¹⁵⁴ AB Va 3, “Project du Citoyen Poirier, du jeudi 25 juillet 1793 aux citoyens composans le comité d’instruction publique.”

king currently held in the deposit of the Louvre.¹⁵⁵ And on October 27, 1793, revolutionaries continued to destroy symbols of the Old Regime by mandating the public burning of “all paintings, stamps, hieroglyphics of feudalism, [and] all acts pertaining to titles of royalty and distinction of order.”¹⁵⁶

The majority of revolutionaries in 1792 and 1793 accepted the concept of burning feudal documents as an ideological liberation from Old Regime France and as a political move to consolidate support for the new revolutionary state. While the law of 12 May 1792 indeed represents the first instance of government-sponsored archival destruction, more importantly, it also signifies the formation of a great compromise; the law did not call for the absolute destruction or the absolute preservation of feudal documents. Officials preserved property tiles and records of significant contribution to history, the sciences, and the arts.¹⁵⁷

The dialogue between advocates of archival destruction and advocates of archival preservation illustrates how revolutionaries were conscious of the intrinsic link between memory, history and the archives. The destruction of feudal records was an expression of revolutionary power over history and social memory; to destroy a document was to erase evidence of its existence and the information it contained, whereas to preserve a document was to accept the information it presented. Records, by virtue of their presence or absence, could be used to create, alter, and ultimately erase the documentary heritage of a society, and thus, the memory and historical depiction of its past. Those who shaped the content of the Archives nationales thus had the power to control and manipulate the knowledge of the past and historical memory.

These debates also illustrate conflicting perceptions of feudal archives as either valuable or threatening to the nation and their place in French history—a clash between those who understood these documents as instrumental, albeit detestable evidence for a complete a picture of the French past and those who viewed feudal archives as ideological threats to the sanctity of France’s historical heritage. It is a conflict between those who could not move forward without destroying all physical reminders of the Old Regime and those who accepted the past and tried to move on, wanting only to draw

¹⁵⁵ AB Va 3, “Décret de la convention nationales du 20 septembre 1793.”

¹⁵⁶ Poulot, 261.

¹⁵⁷ AP 12 May 1792, 275.

upon past events to understand how the present came to be—to use the memory of the Old Regime to enhance the accomplishments of the Revolution.

According to author Richard Terdiman, revolutionaries, especially in the first few years of the Revolution, were overtly proud of their achievements and often went “to great lengths to justify and celebrate the history it was in the process of making.”¹⁵⁸ Historian Françoise Hildesheimer identifies the destructive character of the Revolution in a different way. She instead characterizes legislators as “a-historic” individuals because they tried to erase the past, which gave “no reference upon which to found the Revolution.”¹⁵⁹ Feudalism, in many ways, served as the catalyst for the Revolution. And so she regards the history of the Revolution as inseparable from the memory of its former government, regardless of the attempts from both the public and government to erase the symbols of the Old Regime.

The Law of 7 *messidor* II

In a nation governed by a growing radical faction determined to create a new revolutionary state at the expense of the Old Regime, certain records consequently fell prey to state legislators. The decrees of 1792 and 1793 illustrate the desire of revolutionaries to display the supremacy of the Revolution over the Old Regime in the crucial moments of the new government where political stability seemed uncertain. Legislators in these sessions consistently drew upon their “duty to protect” the Revolution, as though documents of purely feudal origin could conspire with counter-revolutionaries to overthrow the state. The laws themselves remind us that legislators regarded archives as the most important legal and financial sources of power under the Old Regime. With important deposits of the Old Regime gradually making their way into the possession of the revolutionary government since 1790, legislators in 1792 could

¹⁵⁸ Richard Terdiman, "Deconstruction Memory: On Representing the Past and Theorizing Culture in France since the Revolution," *Diacritics*, no. 4 (1985), 334.

¹⁵⁹ Françoise Hildesheimer, "Les Archives Nationales," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructions, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), Françoise Hildesheimer, "Les Archives Nationales," in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructions, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 88. Bordier also makes a similar claim, arguing that “from 1789 to 1800, all revolutionaries came together, raised their voices, and cried ‘Forget! Forget!’ And the government, departmental and communal administrations, popular societies” followed. Bordier, 18.

begin to systematically destroy certain documents as preemptive measures against the threat of the aristocracy or the perpetuation of the feudal past.

But if the laws of 1792 and 1793 are examples of the ways in which legislators shaped the structure and content of the Archives nationales, then the law of 7 *messidor* II represents the ultimate expression of command over the archival heritage of France. Historians generally consider 7 *messidor* II to be the legal foundation of the Archives nationales and the law which created the Agence Temporaire des Titres; revolutionaries thought no differently.¹⁶⁰ But the intentions of revolutionaries in designing the agency still remain unclear. Did legislators mandate the triage of papers to finally rid the nation of titles to abolished feudal rights, or did matters of practicality, such as the need to organize and reduce the size of the archival deposits acquired by the state, have the strongest influence over revolutionaries? Did revolutionaries form the law to erase feudal documents as part of an ideological assault against markers of the Old Regime? Or did legislators, out of fiscal necessity, create the agency to hunt for titles to land and property more aggressively, thereby making the destruction of feudal titles a secondary concern of the triage process?

Since the Archives nationales served the interests of the new revolutionary state, legislators argued that only those documents “which are worthy of deposit in this great nation” should be maintained.¹⁶¹ Legislators in the session of 7 *messidor* II made their intention very clear: all “purely feudal titles” or “useless” papers will be discarded since “it matters to the glory of the nation to not let subsist any monument which recalls the ideas of slavery...the glory of the nation is tainted by her dark past.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ The Faviens argue that the law of 7 *messidor* II was the major decree governing the responsibilities of the national archivists until 3 January 1979. Faviens, *Quinze Siècles*, 16. The law, according to agents, “determined a definitive mode for the composition of the archives established beside the legislative body,...It ordered the annihilation of designated titles, the bringing to public libraries the charters, manuscripts, and monuments that interest history, the sciences, and the arts.” Agents identified the law of 1794 as that which firmly grounded their duties and responsibilities to state. AB Vc 3, “Mémoire important et instructif sur les Pétitions reunites des Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres, year VI (1798).”

¹⁶¹ The phrase “useless feudal titles” or “useless titles to abolished feudal rights” appear frequently in the collection AB Vc 2. For specific examples, see documents “Rapport fait au comité des décrets et archives le 14 *vendémiaire* III (5 October 1794) and “Compte Général Rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* III (November 1795);” Panitch, 33.

¹⁶² Gautherot, *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 21.

An excerpt from deputy Julien Dubois on the passing of 7 *messidor* II illustrates this desire to remove titles of nobility and privilege in order to maintain the integrity of the Archives nationales’:

[T]he first movement of which we feel animated is to deliver all the titles to the flames, and to make disappear, up to the last vestiges, the monuments of an abhorrent regime ...the voice of patriotism cries to us that nothing can subsist that would wear the monstrous imprint of servitude; and the respect for public or particular property imposes us the work of examining carefully all which is useful or useless.¹⁶³

Unlike the debates generated in the session of May 1792, the law of 7 *messidor* II passed unanimously, signaling political unity in the National Convention in 1794 in support of archival destruction.

The language used by legislators when referring to the law of 7 *messidor* II in later months rekindles sentiments of anxiety and fear previously expressed by Delacroix in May of 1792. A commissioner in charge of the Archives nationales stated in October of 1794 that “in a free government” titles of abolished feudal rights “will be dangerous to conserve” with other documents more valuable to the nation.¹⁶⁴ And furthermore, the preservation of these feudal documents—regardless of the public’s awareness of them—stood as an injustice to the people if the government preserved them in the holdings of the Archives nationales.¹⁶⁵ And so this accumulation of purely feudal documents did not only symbolically insult “the dignity of man” and the historical heritage of the nation, titles to abolished rights also posed a legal threat to the Revolution simply because they existed in physical form.¹⁶⁶ It was in the public’s interest, therefore, that the state conduct a severe examination of the records in their possession, removing those legally and historically harmful to the state.

¹⁶³ Gautherot, *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 50-51.

¹⁶⁴ AB Vc 2, “Rapport fait au comité des décrets et archives le 14 *vendémiaire* III (5 October 1794).”

¹⁶⁵ ABI 1, “Rapport et projet du décret ont présenté au nom de la commission des archives... au sujet de l’organisation des archives de la République, le triage, la classification et la destination des titres, les chartes, et les morceaux de manuscrit et les relations des dépôts de plongeurs que le renferment de les avec les archives.”

¹⁶⁶ ABI 1, “Rapport et projet du décret ont présenté au nom de la commission des archives... au sujet de l’organisation des archives de la République, le triage, la classification et la destination des titres, les chartes, et les morceaux de manuscrit et les relations des dépôts de plongeurs que le renferment de les avec les archives.”

While the ideological itch to erase the archival evidence of feudal privileges might have fueled legislators to pass the law unanimously, in another respect however, practicality might have had a greater influence in the execution of the triage. Agents faced a daunting number of large, unorganized collections—one wing of the Louvre alone held one hundred and sixty deposits.¹⁶⁷ Agents were forced to discard documents in order to fit the deposits acquired by the state into the space available in the Archives nationales.

Scholars generally portray the Archives nationales during the Revolution as a ground-breaking moment in archival management because legislators invented new principles of organization. And some might even interpret the process of classifying records “before 14 July 1789” and “after 14 July 1789” as further evidence of an ideological and historical separation from the Old Regime.¹⁶⁸ However, these scholars fail to make the connection that all efforts to create systematic means of classifying and sorting the archives acquired by the state were propelled by reasons of practicality. In this regard, the Agence Temporaire des Titres merely decided what to keep and what to dismiss on practical terms, not as an ideological attack on feudalism. A memoir written by one agent gives strength to this possibility, for the author stated that legislators intended the law of 7 *messidor* II to proceed with “the withdraw of confusion...and the reestablishment of the best possible order” of the deposits acquired by the state. Destruction, according to the author, only impacted the “massive amounts of insignificant papers and parchments;” he makes no mention of the need to erase markers of feudalism that legislators from 1792 to 1794 so often vocalized.¹⁶⁹

While efficiency within the Archives nationales allowed revolutionaries competent and quick access to information, the financial crunch of the state also proved to be a strong motivating factor in the push to create the Agence Temporaire des Titres. Prior to the creation of the Agence Temporaire des Titres, legislators acquired titles of financial utility only if workers came across such papers as they arranged documents at the Archives nationales; there did not yet exist a systemized means of finding titles to

¹⁶⁷ AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796).”

¹⁶⁸ See AB Vc 1 for inventories of collections held in the Archives nationales.

¹⁶⁹ AB Va 3, “Mémoire, écrit par le bureau du Triage.”

land and property prior to the passing of 7 *messidor* II in 1794. A report given by the Commission of Bien Nationaux in spring of 1793 illustrates this frustration of not being able to find documents of fiscal interest in the ecclesiastical deposits acquired by the state:

If it is necessary to wait for the complete evacuation of the archives of different deposits and their transport to the office of the St. Esprit¹⁷⁰, the flow of time will elapse to a considerable degree before the office can have what it wants...It has since been more than four months” that titles fell into our possession, and it is in consequence absolutely necessary to accelerate the delivery of these registers to the office of liquidation.¹⁷¹

Archivists were unfamiliar with the content of the Old Regime deposits acquired by the state. They vaguely knew what type of documents existed in these deposits, but not the exact quantity or location of titles to land and property. Finding these titles of financial utility thus proved to be an overwhelming and difficult task.

The process of sorting through deposits of Old Regime documents after the creation of 7 *messidor* II enabled revolutionaries to physically obtain titles to land and property, which would then be sold off as Bien Nationaux. In a memoire presented to the Executive Director, Camus justified the work of the triage as an important means of securing the fiscal stability of the nation; “the utility of the work [of the Agence Temporaire des Titres],” he states, “is important to the public good, since the result is the establishment of resources for the nation [and] for the maintenance of titles of public and particular fortunes.”¹⁷²

The possible motives that influenced legislators to create and design 7 *messidor* II as they did, be it ideological, practical, or financial, not surprisingly, were all designed to fulfill some interest of the state. Equally unsurprising, is the attempt of revolutionaries to extract the greatest benefit from what remained of the Old Regime while simultaneously disassociating themselves from its identity. The push to erase the memory of Old Regime

¹⁷⁰ St. Esprit was the central holding facility for all ecclesiastical archives acquired by the state.

¹⁷¹ AB Va 3, “Commission de l’administration des biens nationaux, bureau archives, extrait des registres de délibération du 16 avril l’an II (1793) de la republic francaise.”

¹⁷² AB Va 3, “Au directoire-exécutif. Mémoire sur le projet de l’archiviste du corps legislatif de fermer les Bureaux du triage de titres de s’emparer des clefs at des objets de toute nature qui, en vertu d’ordre du ministre des finances, ont été réunis dans ces bureaux.”

France resulted in the legislative mandates of May and June 1792 and July and September 1793 to destroy all physical reminders of a particularly repressive past. But not all of these laws proceeded with unanimous agreement. The legal standing of feudal titles in the revolutionary state and whether legislators should honor titles to land formerly belonging to émigré families represented one challenge in a longstanding debate between the Girondins and Montagnard. The historical significance of feudal documents also forced legislators to decide the place of feudalism in the history of revolutionary France; for on the one hand, to show patriotism for the Revolutionary government meant to remove all titles of nobility or privilege from existence, whereas to embrace feudal titles meant to accept the responsibility of preserving records only for the historical information they yielded and to not regard feudal objects as a threat to the revolutionary state. But the practical and financial interests of the state were most important and underemphasized motives in the creation of the triage process. While legislators pushed to destroy feudal documents in 1792 and 1793 as part of an ideological campaign to erase the Old Regime and to retain political power in the early and unstable years of the Revolution, the triage process mandated in the law of 1794 signaled the first attempt to systematize the organization of Old Regime deposits to find records of financial utility with greater efficiency and ease. The next chapter will evaluate the success of the agency in their search for titles of land and property and their concurrent efforts to discard titles to abolished feudal rights.

THE AGENCE TEMPORAIRE DES TITRES, 1794-1801

Legislators in 1794 designed the law of 7 *messidor* II principally as an ideological break from the Old Regime and created the Agence Temporaire des Titres as a means to ensure the comprehensive destruction of all symbols that represented the “abhorrent” feudal past. In practice, however, the search for titles of abolished feudal rights was a secondary concern. The state’s primary objective was the preservation of titles to land and property because these particular feudal documents helped stabilize the financial welfare of the state.

Indeed, there is evidence that agents discarded titles of nobility and privilege if they came across such records in their hunt for documents of financial utility. But the nature and structure of the triage posed challenges that made it difficult for agents to carry out the mandates of 7 *messidor* II in a consistent fashion. Discrepancies in the law therefore open the possibility that more titles to abolished feudal rights survived the triage than once believed and that agents played a large role, whether directly or indirectly, in the preservation of documents destined for annihilation. In the end, agents did not and could not successfully destroy all titles to abolished feudal rights held in the Old Regime deposits acquired by the state.

Primary source material relative to the agency suggests that revolutionaries invested a great deal of time, money, and support in the triage. However, major scholarship on the Archives nationales does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the triage process. Laborde and Gautherot describe the agency in greater detail than most authors, but they both fail to develop an understanding of the working relationship between the agency, the Archives nationales, and state legislature.¹⁷³ This chapter analyzes and interprets surviving records created by and relative to the Agence Temporaire des Titres that previous scholars have neglected.¹⁷⁴ It seeks to present a basic

¹⁷³ They each list the names of agents and the laws relative to their work, but do not provide analysis of their actual work in the deposits. See Gustave Gautherot, *Le Vandalisme Jacobin: Dstructions Administratives D’archives, D’objects D’art, De Monuments Religieux À L’époque Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1914), Leon de Laborde, *Les Archives De La France Pendant La Révolution: Introduction L’inventaire Du Fonds D’archives Dit Les Monuments Historiques* (Paris: Imprimerie de J. Claye, 1866).

¹⁷⁴ Legislators later renamed the agency to the Bureau du Triage des Titres preliminarily on 4 *ventôse* IV (23 February 1796) and officially with the law of 5 *floréal* IV (24 April 1796).

understanding of the policies that shaped the triage of Old Regime deposits in order to draw out the challenges and contradictions that made the preservation of papers of financial utility and the simultaneous destruction of feudal documents difficult for the agency to carry out.

The Composition of the Agency

The Committee of decrees, process-verbaux, and archives of the National Convention began soliciting nominations for the Agence Temporaire des Titres in October of 1794—four months following the session of 7 *messidor* II.¹⁷⁵ Circulars reached every major administrative agency and invited statesmen to provide the names of citizens “knowledgeable of the charters, laws and monuments” and “equally recommendable for their civisme [...] and their probity.”¹⁷⁶ Legislators selected the following individuals: Jean Blondel, lawyer; Henri-Léonard Bouyn, former guard of the archives of the Maison du Roi held in the Louvre; Pierre Danthonay, former public minister at the siege of la Conmétrable; Philippe-Louis Lieble, former librarian of the Bibliothécaire of the Abbey de St. Germain des-Près; Jean-Ambroise Sylvain Mallet, former caretaker of many diverse deposits in Paris, including the *section juridique* held in the Louvre; Marcel Reboul, former archivist of the college of Louis le-Grand; Pierre-Jacques Rousseau, lawyer and former procurer of the Chatelet deposit; Abbé Jean-Baptist Berger, former chief of the office of the *archives domaniales* and later secretary commissioner to the *section historique*; and Marc-Etienne Villiers du Terrage, former first commissioner of finances and chief of the administrative police under the Minister of Justice.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ AB XXXI 41, “Cicurlaire imprimé du Comité des décrets, du processus-verbaux, et des archives de la convention nationale au sujet du dengiation des preposers du Triage des titres, 6 *brumaire* III (27 October 1794).”

¹⁷⁶ Nomination of the members of the Agence Temporaire des Titres took place on 18 and 21 November 1794. *Archives Parlementaires* (henceforth referred to as *AP*) 7 *messidor* II, article 16; AB Vc 2, “Rapport fait au comité des décrets et des archives the 14 *vendémiaire* III (5 October 1794);” Henri Bordier, *Les Archives De La France Ou Histoire Des Archives De L’empire, Des Archives Des Ministères, Des Communes, Des Hôpitaux, Des Greffes, Des Notaires, Etc., Contenant L’inventaire D’une Partie De Ces Dépôts* (Paris: 1855), 9-10.

¹⁷⁷ AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivose* IV; See AFIII-29 for payroll accounts, dates for 19 *nivôse* IV (22 December 1795), 15 *pluivoise* IV (4 February 1796), 15 *ventôse* IV (5 March 1796); Bordier, 75-85.

The operations of the Agence Temporaire des Titres began in the National Palace of the Sciences and Arts immediately following the confirmation of its agents on November 21, 1794.¹⁷⁸ Although the law of 7 *messidor* II originally called for nine agents, the size and number of Old Regime deposits later necessitated the employment of another seventeen minor workers, thus forming a total of twenty-six employees for the agency.¹⁷⁹ Four of the nine agents selected by the legislature worked under the *section domaniale* and hunted down records pertaining to land and property.¹⁸⁰ Three agents served under the *section juridique* and searched for documents of historic significance, while the remaining two agents sought papers that contributed to the sciences and arts.¹⁸¹

There were more than 5,700 archival repositories scattered throughout France at the time of the Old Regime's collapse.¹⁸² Archivists chose to group major deposits acquired by the state into one, central location by subject; they held all ecclesiastical deposits in the house of Saint-Esprit, a large chapel seized by the state; the deposit of the Louvre held all ten repositories of the king's papers; the archives of notable families stayed with the office of the national domain, also located in the Palace of the Louvre.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ AB Vc 3, "Etat des titres et objets recueillis jusqu'à ce jour pour l'histoire, par le bureau du triage des titres, 1 *germinal* VIII (22 March 1800);" Leon de Laborde, *Les Archives De La France Pendant La Révolution: Introduction L'inventaire Du Fonds D'archives Dit Les Monuments Historiques* (Paris: Imprimerie de J. Claye, 1866), 30.

¹⁷⁹ By 1800, the number of agents decreased to six. See payroll records as evidence in AB Vc 3. A brief synopsis of the other workers employed by the agency: Richard-François-Nicolas Bailly employed later on from 1 *nivôse* III to 1 *ventôse* IX; Drouard de Bousset, employee from 1 *nivôse* III to 1 *ventôse* IX; Pierre-Joseph Fournier, former employee of the archives of the Hotel de Ville from 1773 to 1794 and worker for the agency; Girard, secretary commissioner at the Archives nationales and employee of the agency from 1 *nivôse* III to 1 *ventôse* IX; Dom Joubert, former librarian at the Abbey Saint-Germain des Prés, employed by the agency on 1 *brumaire* X, then man of letters at the office of historic monuments; Alexander-Pierre-François Joesne, employed from 1 *nivôse* III to 1 *ventôse* IX; L. Le Page, employed from 12 *messidor* IV to 1 *ventôse* IX; Joseph-Nicolas Pavillet, employed by the agency in *brumaire* X, then became man of letters for the *section historique*, archivist of the administration of Bien Nationaux of the district of Paris, professor at the Ecole des Chartes; Jean-Baptist Ponsar, former guard of the archives of the Archbishop in Paris, employed from 1 *nivôse* III to 1 *brumaire* X, then became chief of the *section historique*. Bordier, 75-85.

¹⁸⁰ AB Vc 2, "Memoire sur l'organisation des Bureaux de l'Agence Temporaires des Titres," decreed on 16 *frimaire* III (6 December 1794).

¹⁸¹ AB Vc 2, "Memoire sur l'organisation des Bureaux de l'Agence Temporaires des Titres."

¹⁸² Gustave Gautherot, "Les Destructions Des Archives À L'époque Révolutionnaire " *Revue des questions historiques* (1914), 459. See also Appendix II in Gautherot's *Le Vandalisme Jacobin*'s. He provides a complete listing of deposits acquired by the state after 1789: 23 colleges, 26 hospices and hospitals, 43 convents and male congregations, archives of 61 public administrations, 36 tribunals and jurisdictions.

¹⁸³ A list of major ecclesiastical deposits seized by the state: St. Antoine des champs, Abbaye aux Bois, Sainte-Claire, Sainte-Périne de Chaillot, Sainte-Geneviève du Mont, Saint-Germain des Prés, Montmartre, Penthémont, Port-Royal, Saint-Victor, Val-de-Grâce. Revolutionaries kept the former Trésor des Chartes in its original location, in the Palais Justice. The archives of the Duke d'Orléans appears to be the largest

The Guiding Principle of the Triage: Seek Out Documents of Financial Utility

Legislators in 1794 specifically designed the agency to destroy titles to abolished feudal rights because of the records' association with the feudal past. But agents were also held responsible for the disposal of papers no longer of utility to the state, even those of revolutionary origin. Agents considered these papers "useless" because they did not provide any financial or legal utility, historical, scientific, or artistic value, or information relative to the current affairs of the state that warranted their preservation.¹⁸⁴

But even before legislators created the law of 7 *messidor* II and the triage, we can see that legislators sought titles of financial utility as their first priority. On 21 April 1792, the Minister of Justice wrote to Camus: "I find it very important to accelerate the search of titles which help the Republic and the prosperity of its people."¹⁸⁵ And after the passing of 7 *messidor* II in 1794, on 12 June 1795, the National Convention affirmed that "one of the principle objects of its mission was the recovery of all the titles that interest the domain of the republic."¹⁸⁶ Legislators in the spring of 1798 also recognized that the disposal of feudal documents was a secondary concern of the agency; the Directory claimed that practical and fiscal matters, such as the recovery of titles for the sake of Biens Nationaux, were "the principal and most essential object of the operation."¹⁸⁷ Legislators thus encouraged agents to work predominantly for the sake of practicality and fiscal necessity, believing that the agency could never find titles to land and property if the state preserved "papers not of any utility."¹⁸⁸ Hence, the desire to "conserve all the titles which justify the right of property ownership, exchange, and inheritance,"

private deposit referenced. AB Va 3, "L'agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796);" Gautherot *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 457, 459 ; AB Vc 1 (dossier 4) details the type of papers conserved in the archives of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, which included inventories of charters and inventories of letters of Cachet, letters of kings, queens, princes or princesses addressed to the Abbey of SD...; AB Va 3, "Observations sur la demand du Ministre des Finances, fait par sa lettre du 13 *brumaire* VII (3 November 1798), aux Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres."

¹⁸⁴ AP 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794).

¹⁸⁵ ABII-1-dossier 1. 21 April 1792, from Minister of Justice (Ducanthon ?) to Camus.

¹⁸⁶ AB XXXI 41, "12 juin 1795, Convention nationale, décret préliminaire par le Comité des décrets, procès-verbaux, et archives." Underlined included in the document.

¹⁸⁷ AB Ve 1, "Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières operations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf departments réunis, *germinal* VI (May/April 1798)."

¹⁸⁸ AB I 1, "Rapport et Decree de Projet, présenté au nom du committee de domaines finances et legislation sur l'organisation des Archives nationales, par Louis-Prospér Lofficial, 5 mai 1793." Made into official decree on 12 *brumaire* II (23 October 1793).

encouraged agents performing the triage “to rid and disencumber the deposits of [useless] papers” that inconvenienced the government in their search for records of financial utility.¹⁸⁹

Most scholars on the Archives nationales identify records merely as items of historical, scientific, or artistic value. They praise the legislation of 1794 for introducing new methods of organizing and arranging documents, and most importantly, for ensuring the preservation of “monuments useful to history, to the sciences, and to the arts.”¹⁹⁰ But in consequence of such a narrow perspective, these authors fail to see the monetary value that documents yielded during the Revolution and how papers of the Old Regime could provide economic assistance to the state.

Gustave Gautherot is the only scholar to introduce economic considerations to his interpretation of 7 *messidor* II. Gautherot identifies the triage as a means to impair the financial earnings of the émigrés who fled the country, but interprets this economic motivation strictly as a design of the Jacobin state. He fails to see that legislators before and after 1794 were also concerned with money and designed policies to increase revenue for the government.¹⁹¹ Therefore, it is important for readers to understand that this interpretation seeks to justify how revolutionaries across the board, not just the Jacobins, feared the potential bankruptcy of the nation and sought ways to profit from the triage of Old Regime deposits

Further evidence to support the claim that money mattered to revolutionaries is the fact that agents continued to disentangle the deposits of the Old Regime in search of titles to land and property until January of 1801, when legislators terminated the triage with the law of 1 *pluviôse* IX.¹⁹² The triage of Old Regime documents persisted virtually

¹⁸⁹ AB Ve 1, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (May/April 1798).”

¹⁹⁰ For positive interpretations that fail to see archives in monetary terms, see the works of Bordier, Favier, and Posner. Lucie Favier, *La Mémoire De L'état : Histoire Des Archives Nationales* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), Ernst Posner, “Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution,” *The American Archivist* 2 (July 1940). The same can be said even for those who do not think highly of the revolutionary handling of documents. Panitch, Lokke, and Starn fail to integrate economic matters into their evaluations of archival destruction. AB Va 3, “Au directoire-exécutif, mémoire sur le projet de l’archiviste du corps législatif de fermer les Bureaux du triage de titres de s’emparer des clefs at des objets de toute nature qui, en vertu d’ordre du ministre des finances, ont été réunis dans ces bureaux.”

¹⁹¹ Gautherot, *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 57.

¹⁹² AB Vc 3, “Rapport fait au conseil de cinq cents par Villers, député du département du Loire-Inférieure, sur le triage des titres, 12 *prairial* IV (31 May 1796).”

unchanged throughout the Revolution, even as successive revolutionary leaders sought to suppress periodic uprisings of the sans-culottes and to reform the radical policies instituted by the Jacobins.¹⁹³

Legislators following the Jacobin downfall upheld the law of 7 *messidor* II and continued to support the agency because they did not identify the triage of Old Regime deposits a mechanism of radical revolutionary vandalism.¹⁹⁴ Instead, revolutionaries from the summer of 1794 to the spring of 1801 agreed that the triage allowed the state to obtain records of financial utility. Agents recognized that the financial security, and by consequence, the political stability of the nation rested in part upon their ability to acquire titles to land and property. The work of the agency, they stated, contributed to “the public fortune.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, the acquisition of titles to land and property held in the various and voluminous deposits of the Old Regime cancelled out the law’s negative associations with Jacobin zeal, and instead fueled legislators to argue that the triage was nothing but a rational, practical, and profitable examination of documents based on the records’ contribution to the state.

General Policies that Outlined the Triage of Old Regime Deposits

Agents began the triage in November of 1794 and used the law of 7 *messidor* II to guide their operations. The law directed the agency to:

reunite all the titles lost in a multitude of deposits...; to reassemble charters and diplomas that can serve to clarify history or to fix chronology; to gather with care all the memoirs, documents, and pieces that can be useful to the progress of sciences and of the arts, to agriculture and interior navigation; to provide exact notions of the localities concerning industry and commerce; to disentangle and analyze the titles to lands of the national domain and to classify them in chronological order according to subject.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ The largest uprising of the sans-culottes during this period were staged on 12-13 *germinal* III (1-2 April 1795) and 1-4 *prairial* III (20-23 May 1795). Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 99.

¹⁹⁴ The creation of the triage was an indeed a radical effort of Jacobin legislators to erase the Old Regime, but agents never actually performed the triage while Robespierre was in power. Nominations for the agency took place three months after legislators voted to arrest Robespierre and his supporters on 9 *thermidor* II (27 July 1794). And the actual work of the triage did not begin until November of that year.

¹⁹⁵ AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV.”

¹⁹⁶ AB Va 3, “Mémoire sur la loi du sept messidor concernant le triage des titres et l’établissement des archives domaniales, by Cheyré.”

Therefore, the essential responsibilities of the agency were to contribute to the growth of the national domain; the progress of history; the sciences; and the arts; the suppression of “dangerous vestiges of vanity and pride;” and the removal of useless papers.¹⁹⁷

But agents of the Agence Temporaire des Titres were not the only state employees to search for documents of financial utility; there were, in fact, a total of two agencies that examined the deposits of the Old Regime.¹⁹⁸ Archives first underwent inspection by workers of the *section domaniale*, headed by Antoine Cheyré, former first commissioner at the archives of the Maison du Roi under the Old Regime.¹⁹⁹ Cheyré and his staff gathered all titles to land and property with the potential “to establish the property of the national domain,...to restore in totality or in part the forgotten or lost domains” from the deposits they received. The *section domaniale* then gave what papers remained to the Agence Temporaire des Titres.²⁰⁰ The agency provided an added service to the financial gains of the state by making certain that titles of financial utility left behind by the *section domaniale* did not go undetected. The fact that legislators instructed two agencies to find documents of financial utility sheds light on their intense desire to ensure the successful recovery of documents that would increase revenue to the state.

While workers at the *section domaniale* simply removed titles to land and property, agents at the Agence Temporaire des Titres exercised a more thorough examination of the Old Regime deposits. The first step in the triage of records by the

¹⁹⁷ AB I 1, “Rapport et projet du décret ont présenté au nom de la commission des archives...au sujet de l’organisation des archives de la République, le triage, la classification et la destination des titres, les chartes, et les manuscrit et les relations des dépôts divers.”

¹⁹⁸ I did not come across any sign that the *section domaniale* took part in the triage of Old Regime documents in my preliminary research. I chose to focus on the Agence Temporaire des Titres because of its attachment to the law of 7 *messidor* II and because scholars mention this agency, though none has provided an adequate portrait of the triage in practice. I stumbled across reports that illustrated the important role of the *section domaniale* in retrieving titles of financial utility in the latter part of my stay in Paris. If I were to expand this thesis into a dissertation, I would like to examine the *section domaniale* closer.

¹⁹⁹ We know the Agence Temporaire des Titres received documents after the *section domaniale* had a chance to review the Old Regime deposits based on the following: “The office made the examination and the disentangling of titles and pieces given back by the office of the national domain, coming from émigrés, and the feudal titles who had been deposited at the Commune by different particulars in execution of the law...any titles to property have already been taken out of the collection by the office of the *section domaniale*.” AB Vc 3, “Compte rendu par les membres du Bureau du triage des titres. Section dite Domaniale, pendant le mois de *messidor* dernier, *messidor* VI (June/July 1798);” Bordier, 77.

²⁰⁰ AB Va 3, “Mémoire sur la loi du sept *messidor* concernant le triage des titres et l’établissement des archives domaniales, by Cheyré.” No date provided.

Agence Temporaire des Titres, after receiving the deposit from the *section domaniale*, was to filter “useful from useless.” The agency used the word “dépouillement”—the act of examining, inspecting or casting off—to describe this process of separating documents into two principle classes: “papers to conserve, papers to annihilate.”²⁰¹ Agents then distributed all records deemed “useful” between the different sections of the Archives nationales; documents relative to public or private property went to the *section domaniale*; papers of legal content, such as notarial minutes and judicial registers of civil or criminal tribunals, went to the *section juridique*; records of historic, scientific, or artistic value went to the National Library for cataloging; and titles of abolished feudal rights went into storage until properly discarded.²⁰²

Agents kept an excellent record of the papers they preserved, but based on archives that survive to this day, there is not enough evidence to establish that agents also kept inventories or itemized records of the documents they destroyed. The law of 7 *messidor* II only held the agents responsible for the classification and inventory of those collections intended for preservation in the Archives nationales, which meant that they recorded only of those documents of legal, fiscal, or historical utility to the state; it was outside their jurisdiction to make an inventoried list of papers destined for annihilation.²⁰³

Members of the Agence Temporaire des Titres worked closely with the Archives nationales to coordinate the triage of deposits in the state’s possession, but the National Archivist engaged only in moderate interaction with the agency. Agents generally corresponded with Camus on a monthly basis by sending an update on their progress in each of the deposits.²⁰⁴ These reports followed a format similar to the one designed by Camus to catalog the archives of the state legislature: a table to the left indicated the name of the collection, followed by “observations,” such as the location of the deposit

²⁰¹ AB Va 3, “Lettre de l’Agence Temporaire des Titres au citoyen ministre de la justice, 26 *nivôse* IV (16 January 1796);” AB Vc 3, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March/April 1796).”

²⁰² AB I 1, “Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres du département de la Seine;” AB Vc 3, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March/April 1796).”

²⁰³ The idea of making an inventory to acknowledge the existence of documents said to be destroyed was brought up in the debate of 1792, but turned down by majority sentiment. See *AP* 12 May 1792; AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivose* IV (3 January 1796).”

²⁰⁴ See collection AB Vc 3 for reports in monthly intervals.

before and after seizure by the state. To the right, agents indicated the type of documents found in the deposits, such as “titles and information on the goods of the clergy,” and which office received the collection for arrangement in the Archives nationales, either “judicial” or “domaniale.”²⁰⁵

Even though Camus seldom communicated with agents, he was nevertheless legally responsible for overseeing the Archives Nationales and all associated operating bodies, which included the Agence Temporaire des Titres. But in practice, the Minister of the Interior, Minister of Justice, and Minister of Finance, assigned the order of collections to be inspected by agents at some point during the Revolution; neither the legislature nor the National Archivist possessed such a commanding influence over the triage of deposits.²⁰⁶

The Triage of Old Regime Deposits in Practice

Archival repositories belonging to the clergy, confiscated soon after the state nationalized church property on 3 November 1789, were the first deposits examined by the agency.²⁰⁷ The confiscation of church property was indeed a radical attempt to centralize political power over the clergy and to accumulate financial revenue for the revolutionary cause. The church owned more than ten percent of all the land in the nation; by nationalizing ecclesiastical property and then selling the land for a profit, revolutionaries could thus settle, to a limited degree, the financial woes facing the newly formed revolutionary state. Clerical lands, buildings, and all items within became the rightful property of state, but legislators needed to physically obtain titles that validated the state’s possession of ecclesiastical property in order to complete the sales transactions. Revolutionaries in 1790 began to seize archives of churches, abbeys, and congregational orders scattered throughout the nation—knowing full well the nature of

²⁰⁵ AB Vc 1, “Unlabeled table indicating deposits, archives, and charters existing in Paris.”

²⁰⁶ The Minister of the Interior governed the agency from 1794 until the Executive Directory assumed control in 1795. Three months later, legislators instructed the Minister of Justice to oversee their operations, followed by the National Archivist on April 24, 1796, then followed by the Minister of Finance one month after. AB Va 4, “4 *brumaire* IV (26 October 1795), Au secrétaire général du comité de la sûreté publique.” F 1a 594 4 14, “Lettre du M. de l’intérieur au Citoyen-Représentative de la convention nationale, 19 *brumaire* IV (10 November 1795).”

²⁰⁷ AB Va 3, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* III (November 1794).”

their contents. The triage of these deposits, however, did not take place until legislators created the Agence Temporaire des Titres in 1794.

The confiscation of ecclesiastical papers is one of the first indicators that legislators—even in the first year of the Revolution—sought to obtain papers of financial utility. Workers at the *section domaniale* and agents of the Agence Temporaire des Titres first examined deposits believed to have held “an immense quantity of titles relative to Biens Nationaux...titles concerning woods, and financial records.”²⁰⁸ The king’s deposits qualified as one of the more important and considerable of the Old Regime deposits absorbed by the state. And so in 1795, amidst sans-culotte protests in the spring and counter-revolutionary uprisings in the fall, agents gradually divided their attention between the ecclesiastical deposits held at St. Esprit and the king’s papers held in the Louvre. Agents also identified the deposit of the Augustins, which held private papers of many significant noble and émigrés families, to be the third largest and most significant deposit to contain “a great quantity of *arrêts* and titles to religious goods.”²⁰⁹ Foreign archives also underwent intense examination; the immediate triage of Flemish and Italian documents suggests that revolutionaries sought papers that would secure their legal and fiscal hold of properties in the territories they conquered during the war against Europe.²¹⁰

The first stage of the triage process proved difficult for the agency. The six-month time limit allotted by the law of 1794 placed immense pressure on agents to disentangle massive quantities of paper quickly, but cautiously. Agents had to be careful to avoid losing or misclassifying documents considered “useful and most precious,” such as

²⁰⁸ Cheyré, director of the *section domaniale*, also guarded the deposit of the Louvre. AB Va 3, “L’agence Temporaire des Titres au représentans du peuple composant le comité des décrets, procès-verbaux, et archives;” AB I 1, “Rapport et Decree de Projet, présenté au nom du comité de domaines finances et législation sur l’organisation des Archives nationales, by Louis-Prosper Lofficial. Observations de l’agence des titres on its works.”

²⁰⁹ This collection was said to have filled ten apartments. AB I 1, “Rapport et Decree de Projet, présenté au nom du comité de domaines finances et législation sur l’organisation des Archives nationales, par Louis-Prosper, 5 mai 1793.”

²¹⁰ There is a great quantity of documents concerning the triage of foreign papers acquired by the Republic in collection ABVa3. AB Ve 1, “Instruction Préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March/April 1796)” —refers specifically to the triage of archives seized from Belgium.

papers of legal, fiscal, and historical value, with titles to abolished feudal rights destined for annihilation.²¹¹ Legislators eventually did away with time constraints altogether.

By 3 January 1796 (13 *nivose* IV), agents under the supervision of the Directory had successfully examined the deposits of St. Esprit and the Louvre, destroying “more than one hundred twenty-six deposits” in the holdings.²¹² In September of that year, agents sorted through the archives of the houses of Soubise, Orléans, Condé, Conti, and Penthièvre.²¹³ But by fall of 1798, four years into the triage, there still existed “more than 400 deposits of archives” in need of inspection.²¹⁴ In a report dated 27 *fructidor* VIII (14 September 1800), with the triage of documents slowly drawing to a close in the first years of Napoleon’s reign, agents announced the result of five years of work: the examination of “more than one hundred thousand sacks of productions and criminal procedures” for the *section juridique*, and “an estimated six thousand cartons” distributed between the *section domaniales* and the Bibliothèque nationales.²¹⁵

But the successful recovery of documents of utility to the state proved to be a very trying task. Letters issued from the agency to their superiors conveyed sentiments of confusion, dismay, and helplessness as agents described the overwhelming condition of the deposits of the Old Regime. Agents reported to Minister of the Interior at the end of their first six months conducting the triage that deposits of the Old Regime contained a substantially unequal measure of “useful” and “useless” feudal documents; they found only a small number of important papers in proportion to a considerable number of useless papers in each deposit.²¹⁶

²¹¹ Agents characterized the deposits held in St. Chapelle as existing in a state of “disorder and confusion.” AB II 2, “Paris, 7 *priarial* IX (27 May 1801) to Camus from Bailly;” AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les membres du bureau du triages des titres du département de la seine, 27 *fructidor* VIII (14 September 1800).”

²¹² AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796).”

²¹³ Lucie Favier, *La Mémoire De L’etat : Histoire Des Archives Nationales* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 54-55.

²¹⁴ AB Vc 3, “Mémoire important et instructif sur les Pétitions reunites des Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres, year VII (1799).”

²¹⁵ As a reminder, the Bibliothèque nationales received all papers relative to history, the sciences, and the arts. AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les membres du bureau du triages des titres du département de la seine, 27 *fructidor* VIII (14 September 1800).”

²¹⁶ Even before the creation of the Agence Temporaire des Titres, legislators realized with disappointment that there would always exist “a great number of useless pieces” in the deposits confiscated or absorbed by the revolutionary government. AB I 1, “Rapport et Decree de Projet, présenté au nom du committee de domains finances et legislation? sur l’organisation des Archives nationales, by Louis-Prosper Lofficial. 5

Agents continued to express sentiments of frustration and anxiety at the fruitless outcome of their labors after one year of examining documents. They began to ponder the idea that perhaps “all the deposits are evidently useless” and that they would not find any records of immediate or foreseeable utility to the government.²¹⁷ By November of 1795, agents had completed the triage of over one hundred cartons and affirmed that there was “absolutely nothing found of utility...nothing dignified enough to be conserved, except some memoirs of deliberations or procès-verbaux of the assembly and of the high clergy that [the agency] preserved as historic monuments.”²¹⁸ In spring of 1796, agents received papers belonging to the former ministerial officers under the Old Regime, but found these “parchments absolutely useless.”²¹⁹ On another such occasion in 1796, the agency preserved little “more than a hundred and fifty archives” pertaining to history from a collection out of the remaining “useless” papers whose weight measured in at “222,000 *livres*.”²²⁰

Later reports submitted by the agency reflect a more positive outlook. In May of 1798, agents successfully recovered a substantial number of “contracts of donations; exchanges; transactions; declarations; minutes; and all that which interests property” from ecclesiastical deposits held in St. Esprit.²²¹ Agents recovered many diverse records in the deposit of St. Chapelle du Palais, including minutes and registers of notaries; “a carton containing interesting pieces for history, commerce, navigation, and administration; a carton containing *terriers* and other land titles, a carton containing registers of birth, marriage; and a carton containing some notes on natural history.”²²² The private papers of the Duke d’Orléans produced a substantial quantity of documents that agents proclaimed “would interest the administration, the sciences, and arts,” such as

mai 1793;” AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *germinal* III (April 1795).”

²¹⁷ AB XXXI 41, “National Convention, Preliminary Decree by the Committee of Decrees, procès-verbaux, and archives, 2 *prairial* III (21 May 1795).”

²¹⁸ AB Vc 2, “The Temporary Agency of Titles to the Representants du peuple composans the Committee of decrees, process-verbaux, and archives, 11 *nivôse* III (31 December 1794).”

²¹⁹ AB Va 3, “L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796).”

²²⁰ ABVc3, “Report made to the council of five hundred by Villers, deputy of the department of the Loire-Inférieure, on the triage of titles, 12 *prairial* IV (31 May 1796).”

²²¹ ABVc3, “Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (*section domaniale*) pendant le mois de *floréal* dernier, year VI (April/May 1798).”

²²² AB II 2, “Etat de minutes et pièces résultant du Triage fait à la St. Chapelle du Palais, En déposées provisoirement dans trois armoires de la Scristie.”

“registers of letters written by the Duc d’Orléans in 1707-1708 to the king, to ministers and others; pieces relative to the birth of the reagent and their legitimacy; meeting minutes of the sessions of the prince; and original letters from Louis XV and Louis XVI.”²²³ The papers of the émigré Vicomte de Turenne were also seized by the state under the assumption that his deposit contained “a prodigious quantity of titles” to land and property of interest to the nation domain.²²⁴ By late 1798, the state seized the private deposits of six more families.²²⁵ And to the surprise of the agency, military deposits belonging to the Old Regime held important papers of legal and financial utility, including testaments, contracts of marriage sales, acquisitions, exchanges, transactions, divisions, and acquittals.²²⁶

Over the course of their employment, agents retrieved “immense collections of papers of all natures,” varying from:

letters of correspondence between the king and his intendants and ministers; administrative records; criminal processes; letters of graces, of abolition, of cachets; recommendations of office appointments; ecclesiastical disputes; old letters of change, bills of banks, exemptions; contracts drawn by notaries, contracts of acquisition and exchange; contractual judgments; judicial transactions containing transfers, exchange, and non-feudal incorporeal rights; judicial information that serve to establish contested rights, the old and new *terriers*; visual and geometric maps; accounts of receipts; procès-verbaux of land surveys of woods and forests, and finally the titles relative to the property of markets, of windmills, and of communal ovens, of which were suppressed.²²⁷

²²³ ABVc3, “Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (*section domaniale*) pendant le mois de *floréal* dernier, year VI (April/May 1798);” AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (*section domaniale*) pendant le mois de *fructidor* dernier (August/September 1798).”

²²⁴ “Their titles appeared precious for the republic or for the families living in the aforementioned seigneuries. We conserved them.” AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, au citoyen Camus, représentative et garde des archives nationales, 3 *vendémiaire* V (24 September 1796).”

²²⁵ AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (*section domaniale*) pendant le mois de *floréal* dernier, l’an VI (April/May 1798).”

²²⁶ The state seized deposits from the following noble families: Avesues, Chimay, Beaumont, Estroing, Sanselles, Comines. AB Vc 3, Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (*section domaniale*) pendant le mois de *thermidor* dernier l’an VI (July/August 1798).”

²²⁷ AB Vc 2 (dossier 3) has an inventory of registers and cartons of the *section domaniale*, containing different property, land, and forests titles; AB Vc 3, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March/April 1796);” AB Va 3, “L’agence Temporaire des Titres au représentans du peuple composant le comité des décrets, procès-vebraux, et archives. Observations de l’agence des titres on its works;” AB Va 3,

While the state mostly accumulated papers of financial utility, they also sought ways to profit from documents classified by agents as “useless.”²²⁸ The state sought ways to employ papers “sent to refuse” or “taken to rebut”—terms used to describe papers no longer of utility to the state, but not titles of abolished feudal rights—more constructively. On one occasion, the Minister of the Interior sold the papers of M. des Champs to be recycled for the making of new paper.²²⁹ Legislators also used papers set aside for destruction, including titles to nobility and privilege, for use in agriculture and as alternative means of financing their war against Europe. In fall of 1798, the Minister of the Interior ordered members of the Conservatoire of Arts and Métiers to coordinate the transportation of “a large quantity of papers of refuse” to a facility where they would be “offered to the service of the artillery and for the making of cartridges.”²³⁰

And while agents primarily inspected deposits of the Old Regime, archives of revolutionary origin also underwent triage. Even before the creation of the Agence Temporaire des Titres in 1794, legislators in 1791 called for all administrative offices and committees to remove papers no longer relative to the affairs of the state and to keep only “those that will enrich and purify [the nation’s] treasure.”²³¹ The agency made several attempts to notify Camus that the majority of documents held in state offices “are absolutely useless” and suggests that they be discarded immediately to free up valuable space in the holdings of the Archives nationales.²³² Government records sent to refuse

“L’agence temporaire des titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796).”

²²⁸ The agency’s superior at the time determined how to best employ papers for the immediate profit of the nation.

²²⁹ AB Va 4, “Bureau de Manuscrits, Titres de Famille de Noblesse.”

²³⁰ For use in agriculture, see AB Vc 2, “Compte Général Rendu by the Temporary Agency of Titles;” For use in making cylinders and cartridges, see AB Vc 3, “Mémoire important et instructif sur les Pétitions reunites des Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres, year VII (1799);” AB Vc 2, “Instruction préliminaire, décret par le comité des décrets, minutes, et archives: pour les premières règles de premier ministre desquelles préposés au triage, établies dans les départements dans l’exécution de la loi du *messidor* 7... ;” AB Vc 3, “Correspondence from the minister of the Interior to Citizen Camus, garde des archives de la République, 14 *brumaire* VII (4 November, 1798);” AB Vc 3, “Lettre de Molard, membre du conservatoire des arts et métiers au citoyen Camus, garde des archives de la République Française, 24 *brumaire* VII, (14 November 1798).”

²³¹ AP 20 December 1791.

²³² Agents kept to a thirty-year time limit, preserving only those records dated less than thirty years old: “All those before that said thirty years must be taken to refuse.” AB Vc 3, “Instruction préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March/April 1798); AB I 1, “Journal des débats et des décrets, Corps Législatif, Conseil des Anciens, Présidence du C. Delmas, Suite de la Séance du 27 *germinal*, l’an cinquième de la République Française.

were often administrative or military records created under the revolutionary state that no longer related to current events and did not qualify as material of historical value.²³³

The Disposal of Feudal Archives by Agents

Although agents primarily sought feudal titles to land and property, there is ample evidence to support the claim that they indeed took measures to destroy titles to abolished feudal rights. Legislators reminded agents in the first months of the triage to “conserve only those titles precious to the Republic, and to make disappear those that will be dangerous to conserve,” referring specifically to titles of nobility and privilege.²³⁴ Reports issued to the agency in 1795 reflect sentiments of fear that correspond to the heightened social unrest taking hold of France. Legislators reiterated the call to protect the Revolution from counter-revolutionaries by making sure that their titles to nobility and privilege are “never to be found in a deposit...We feel the need to promptly throw to refuse all papers of this nature which show only negative illustrations of the human spirit.”²³⁵ National Archivist Camus confirmed this strategy, stating that the responsibilities of the agency were to keep only papers of interest to the state, to decide those that are useless, and “to annihilate all that is contrary to the Constitution of the Republic.”²³⁶

By way of this constant repetition, agents in the first year of the triage came to understand the importance of erasing feudal documents. In their monthly reports to Camus, agents used the same phrase to describe how they fulfilled the demands of the

L’Imprimerie du journal des Débats,” 439-440; AB Vc 2, “Instruction préliminaire, décret par le comité des décrets, minutes, et archives: pour les premières règles de premier ministre desquelles préposés au triage, établies dans les départements dans l’exécution de la loi du *messidor* 7... ;” AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, section juridique, au citoyen Camus, garde des Archives nationales, 1 *frimaire* V (21 november 1796) ;” While sorting through the minister of finance, agents specified that they took “to repose a great quantity of bundles of procès-verbaux, a great quantity of papers...insignificant today...” AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, section juridique, au citoyen Camus, garde des Archives nationales, 16 *messidor* IV (4 July 1796).”

²³³ AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres.”

²³⁴ AB Vc 2, “Rapport fait au comité des décrets et des archives le 14 *vendémiaire* III (5 October 1794).”

²³⁵ AB Vc 2, “Instruction préliminaire, décret par le comité des décrets, minutes, et archives: pour les premières règles de premier ministre desquelles préposés au triage, établies dans les départements dans l’exécution de la loi du *messidor* 7...”

²³⁶ AB Vc 2, “Mémoire de Camus sur l’Agence temporaire des titres.”

legislature: “We believe to have put aside for annihilation all the titles that concern feudal rights... We classified only those documents relative to *terriers*, woods, [and] houses.”²³⁷

After one year, the Agence Temporaire des Titres claimed to have sent “two hundred thousand papers and parchments” to refuse, later to be recycled.²³⁸ Within a two-month duration, agents “freed at the benefit of the Republic” more than thirty thousand pieces, and by the following May of 1796, “the useless papers and parchments that were destroyed produced an amount 222,000 *livres*.”²³⁹ That number soon escalated to an amount “more than one million heavy” by the fall of 1798.²⁴⁰ The agency continued to discard records in the fall of 1800; the final number claimed to have been destroyed was “one million, fifty thousand papers and parchments were taken to refuse.”²⁴¹

But while agents frequently confirmed the total amount of papers taken to refuse, they rarely differentiated between titles to abolished feudal rights and papers of non-feudal origin deemed “useless” to the state.²⁴² Agents regularly acknowledged the destruction of “all [papers] that looked like letters from nobles, of privileges, of evocations,” yet they never disclosed a number or weight measurement specifically of those titles of nobility and privilege said to have been destroyed.²⁴³

While the hunt for titles to land and property remained the first priority of agents over the course of the Revolution, the distinction made between papers destined “for

²³⁷ All the compte rendus follow an almost identical wording, much to this extent: “We address to you the state of papers...during the month of *floréal*, we had continued the gathering of titles and papers... We observe to you that we have conserved all the titles and useful information found in the deposits...;” AB Va 4, “Compte que rend le citoyen Cheyré de des operations préliminaire, aux citoyens membres composant le comité des décrets, archives, et procès-verbaux de la convention nationale, year VII (1799);” AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau de triage des Titres au citoyen Camus, garde des archives de la Republic, 3 *prairial* IV (22 May, 1796).”

²³⁸ AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* IV (November 1795).”

²³⁹ AB Va 3, “L’Agence Temporaire des Titres des archives au citoyen ministre de la justice, 13 *nivôse* IV (3 January 1796);” AB Vc 3, “Rapport fait au conseil de cinq cents par Villers, député du département du Loire-Inférieure, sur le triage des titres, 12 *prairial* IV (31 May 1796).”

²⁴⁰ AB Vc 3, “Rapport fait par le directoire exécutif, avec un projet de message au conseil de cinq cents, pour savoir si la loi de 21 *vendémiaire* VII supprime le bureau du Triage;” AB Vc 3, “Observations sur la demand du Ministre des Finances, fait par sa lettre du 13 *brumaire* VII (3 November 1798), aux Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres.”

²⁴¹ AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les membres du bureau du triages des titres du département de la seine, 27 *fructidor* VIII (14 September 1800).”

²⁴² On certain occasions, we see a brief note about what feudal documents agents destroyed, such as “rights of Gabelles, inventories of feudal titles and genealogy titles...titles relative to the Abbey of Cluny...privileges accorded by Louis XIV, privileges of his orders.” AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres.”

²⁴³ AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, section juridique, au citoyen Camus, garde des Archives nationales, 1 *frimaire* V (21 november 1796).”

annihilation” and those destined “for refuse” slowly faded as the century came to a close. Reports, memos, and instructions delivered to and submitted by the agency illustrate a gradual decline in the strong language that previous radical revolutionaries often employed. Agents in 1794 and 1795 used the phrases “we suppressed” or “we rejected” feudal titles to nobility and privilege; this type of charged language signified the dominance of the Revolutionary state over the archival vestiges of an “abhorrent” feudal past.²⁴⁴ Agents in 1796, however, gradually began to limit their use of the word “annihilate.” And by 1798, the rhetoric of archival destruction against titles to nobility and privilege ceased altogether. Instead, agents referred to papers previously set aside for “annihilation” simply as “items for refuse” or “papers for rebut,” which suggests that charged ideological concerns no longer drove the triage as strongly as it once did.²⁴⁵

Obstacles and Shortcomings of the Triage: A Reevaluation of Archival Destruction

The six years of service provided by the agency in the hunt for titles of financial utility is evidence that consistent financial shortcomings plagued legislators; despite their different political beliefs, revolutionaries across the board understood that the acquisition of titles to land and property prevented, or at least postponed, the bankruptcy of the state. Legislators indeed appreciated the financial revenue offered by the agency and the simultaneous removal of “useless” papers and archival evidence of the “abhorrent” feudal past. However, at the same time, they were unaware that the nature of the triage and the procedures governing the agency made the successful retrieval of titles of financial utility and the comprehensive destruction of titles of nobility and privilege rather challenging.

One Source of Discrepancy: the Unique Interpretations of Each Agent

The Agence Temporaire des Titres sought to provide a consistent service, and yet the nature of their work made the process of triaging documents in a uniform fashion almost entirely impossible. Although the law clearly authorized the destruction of feudal records, the will of legislators could only go so far; agents were the ones physically responsible for entering and examining the deposits of the Old Regime. Based on archival

²⁴⁴ Gauherot, *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 45.

²⁴⁵ AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres.”

evidence that survives today, it becomes clear that agents worked independently on the deposits assigned to them.²⁴⁶ The triage process therefore took place according to each agent's personal interpretation of the law.

Indeed, legislators nominated the nine agents based on their loyalty to the Revolution and their ability to recognize and interpret documents of substantial legal and fiscal utility to the state. Nevertheless, personal judgment inevitably created discrepancies in each agent's treatment of feudal records.²⁴⁷ Agents interpreted documents differently according to their individual perceptions of the record's utility or contribution to the state—essentially judging whether the document in question could be of judicial relevance, of financial utility, of use in condemning counter-revolutionaries, or of significance the progress of history, the sciences, and the arts. What agents thought should or should not be destroyed was therefore a matter of individual assessment—a matter of working “in his mode, or to his tastes,” as stated in one memorandum.²⁴⁸ One agent explicitly acknowledged this disparity by stating that his approach to the triage was “far from being equal to those of the other agents.”²⁴⁹ Another agent reiterated this point by describing how, on one occasion, he found one collection of papers to be worthy of destruction because he qualified them “as purely feudal material.” But another agent, he claimed, “found the papers to merit being conserved.”²⁵⁰ And so while one agent would describe a collection of documents as vestiges of feudalism, another would regard the same records as useful to the state because of the important judicial information they yielded.

There are still other indicators that the agency preserved documents that should have been destroyed. Fear of being too harsh or condemning too many papers as “useless” gave agents reason to cast a wider net—to be less strict in their examinations and to allow the preservation of feudal documents that legislators in 1794 purposely designed the law to destroy. Agents recognized the importance of evaluating records in a

²⁴⁶ *AP 7 messidor* year II (25 June 1794), 385.

²⁴⁷ Legislators decreed that agents were to be hired based on “their talents, their capacity, and of their knowledge of charters and manuscripts.” See article 16 of *AP 7 messidor* II (25 June 1794).

²⁴⁸ AB I 1, “Memo regarding the Agence.”

²⁴⁹ AB Vc 2, “Compte général rendu par l'Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* III (November 1794).”

²⁵⁰ AB Vc 3, “Mémoire important et instructif sur les Pétitions reunites des Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres, year VII (1799).”

cautious manner in order to avoid the loss or misclassification of documents of utility.²⁵¹ Agents declared themselves “on guard against an examination too severe, and a precipitation too inconsiderate” that might lead “to the detriment of the interests of the Republic”—meaning the destruction of records of legal, financial, or historical value.²⁵² And so agents aspired to be absolutely confident in their decisions to destroy a document, knowing full well that they could never reconstruct the record or recover the information from its ashes. Prudence, therefore, guided agents to a middle way between complete destruction and complete conservation.²⁵³

Agents and their superiors were at times reluctant to destroy feudal archives for fear that the government would have a need for them at a later date, as demonstrated on this occasion: the Minister of the Interior overruled the decision to send to refuse all papers of military schools created under the Old Regime. Instead, he transferred the deposit to the national library, believing it “necessary to conserve them again because the Minister of the Police has a need to consult certain pieces of the collection in some important affairs.” But the Minister of the Interior later authorized the destruction of the records once the Minister of the Police no longer had a need of them.²⁵⁴ Thus, it was possible for the government to recover papers that the agency sent to refuse, but only if the “useless” documents became “useful” in the present or foreseeable future. This example also illustrates how a document’s utility to the state changed based on the circumstances at the time; so long as a record could offer some financial or legal utility at present, or the government believed it could be of financial or legal utility in the future, the agency would preserve it; the same document, however, would be discarded if the state exhausted all possible avenues of utility from the record.

²⁵¹ ABI-1, *Compte Rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des Titres du département de la Seine*

²⁵² AB Va 3, “Mémoire sur la loi du sept messidor concernant le triage des titres et l’établissement des archives domaniales, by Cheyré;” AB Vc 2, “Preliminary instruction, decree by the committee of decrees, minutes, and archives: for the first premier rules of which les préposés to the triage, established in the departments in execution of the law of 7 messidor...”

²⁵³ The full quote reads as follows: “It’s sagacity and prudence of those in charge of the triage to serve as the just middle between barbarous vandalism that wants to destroy all the same to the detriment of the Republic, and those who want to conserve all and who would work contrary to the visible intention of the law.” AB Ve 1, “Instruction Préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March 1798).”

²⁵⁴ AB Va 4, “Lettre du ministre de l’intérieur aux commissaires des archives et au garde des Archives nationales, 5 *fructidor* VI (22 August 1798).”

Confusion From Above

Recurrent changes in the administration of the Archives nationales posed challenges for the Agence Temporaire des Titres.²⁵⁵ Even though the laws outlining the work of the triage stayed constant, agents struggled to please their different superiors. Similarly, agents did not always follow the instructions of their assigned officer; they were also at the mercy of those who pressed orders upon them in a roundabout fashion. On one occasion, Cheyré, head of the *section domaniale*, combated Camus' aggressive tendency to direct the triage of records without having the proper authority to do so. Just months before the overthrow of the Directory by Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès and Napoléon Bonaparte, Cheyré informed the Minister of the Interior that Camus "continues to push upon the triage... pretending to have the surveillance and the exclusive direction of the *archives domaniales* and [the agency]...so that he may halt the triage of Old Regime documents assigned by one minister in order to assign the tasks he sees fit to be done."²⁵⁶ Cheyré requested the Minister of Justice to rectify the situation and stressed the need "to distinguish a surveillance of order and of police, with a surveillance of direction and administration."²⁵⁷ The overlapping direction of the agency illustrates how the work of the triage was prone to administrative conflicts of jurisdiction and suggests that not all officials had the same vision of the triage. The struggle for power and lack of uniformity in direction from the agency's superiors gave rise to the interrupted triage of collections and therefore delayed the acquisition of financial resources for the nation.

The lack of clear instruction from the central law governing the triage further misled and confused the agency. Agents in 1798 expressed sentiments of uncertainty towards 7 *messidor* II because the law did not specify the conservation or destruction of certain feudal records, such as the papers of notaries that were "found in the archives of

²⁵⁵ Authority over the agency changed hands several times throughout the course of the Revolution. In 1794, agents first followed the orders of the Minister of the Interior, but soon after came under supervision of the Executive Directory in September of 1795. Almost three months later, legislators instructed the Minister of Justice to survey the deposits of the triage, thereby giving him limited rights to oversee the work of the agency.²⁵⁵ National Archivist Camus finally took command of the agency on April 24, 1796, only to give up control one month following to the Minister of Finance, whom then governed the triage of records until legislators dissolved the agency in January of 1801 (1 *pluviôse* IX).

²⁵⁶ AB Va 3, "Citizen Cheyré, dépositaire des archives domaniales, au citoyen le ministre de la justice, 15 *fructidor* VII (1 septembre 1799)."

²⁵⁷ AB Va 3, "Citizen Cheyré, dépositaire des archives domaniales, au citoyen le ministre de la justice, 15 *fructidor* VII (1 septembre 1799)."

churches, monasteries, of the order of Malte, of the émigrés and others.”²⁵⁸ Agents justified the preservation of these documents created under the Old Regime since they could potentially provide information to the state on legal matters.

The vague wording of 7 *messidor* II also left room to justify the keeping of titles to nobility and privilege as valuable contributions to the teaching of history. Article twelve of 7 *messidor* II ordered the preservation of all documents “that belong to history, to the sciences and to the arts, or that serve public instruction.”²⁵⁹ Based on the apparent individual interpretation of documents, agents could justify the keeping of feudal titles to abolished rights by qualifying these papers as priceless artifacts of the French past because they illustrated the customs and injustices of feudalism.

Indeed, there is evidence to establish that revolutionaries preserved documents solely for their historical and pedagogical value.²⁶⁰ According to agents, records merited preservation as a historically significant object because of their “antiquity, the curious traits that they display, the beauty of their character and the singularity of their date or their form.”²⁶¹ Agents likewise acknowledged that the law of 7 *messidor* II ordered them to preserve “titles or charters...as they are the founders of history, of chronology, of science, and art, and of alliances between the people of the world.”²⁶² And so even a law created under radical Jacobin rule, allowed for the preservation of historically valuable papers, regardless of their origin under the Old Regime. The agency also preserved many papers for their historical content from the private deposits of noble families and foreign archives seized by the state.²⁶³ In 1800, agents listed the different kinds of records they

²⁵⁸ AB Ve 1, “Instruction Préliminaire pour régler les premières opérations relatives au triage des Titres dans les neuf départements réunis, *germinal* VI (March 1798).”

²⁵⁹ AP 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794), 387; Bordier, 7.

²⁶⁰ AB Vc 3, “Compte rendu par les membres du Bureau du triage des titres. Section dite Domaniale, pendant le mois de *messidor* dernier, *messidor* VI (June/July 1798).”

²⁶¹ AB Va 3, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* III (November 1794).”

²⁶² AB Va 3, “Compte général rendu par l’Agence Temporaire des Titres, *brumaire* III (November 1794).”

²⁶³ Agents also preserved for history “the titles of foundation for the different religious orders of former Belgium;...titles that observe historic events like wars and the changing of dynasties; all that which can serve to give knowledge of the spirit and character and the manners of the inhabitants, costumes, customs, religious practices and ceremonies...” AB Vc 3, “Compte rendu par les Membres du Bureau du Triage des titres (section domaniale) pendant le mois de *brumaire* dernier (October/November 1798); AB Ve 1, “Archives étrangers, Archives de la Belgique en général corresponsance, rapports, pieces diverses, projets de triage et de classement, an VI-1813.”

preserved throughout the past five years of the triage as “objects belonging to history.”²⁶⁴

Among these were:

historical dictionaries; histories of ecclesiastical orders; registers and reflections on the history of France,...a table containing the genealogy of the kings of France, since Pharamond in 420, up to Louis XIII, printed in 1719; the state of the French before the establishment of the monarchy; the state of the French since the monarchy; diplomatic titles; papers of French kings dating back from Charlemagne to Louis XVI; documents relative to the government of France in general, the Etats Généraux, the Etats provinciaux; registers of Parlements,...contracts of marriage of French or foreign princes, testaments of kings and princes, genealogies, and matters of diplomacy, which included collections of public acts, negotiations, and treaties of peace.²⁶⁵

But while agents acknowledged the preservation of a wide variety of records for the making and writing of history, there is no evidence to support the claim that agents explicitly retained titles to privilege or nobility.²⁶⁶

Other Potential Causes: Mismanagement and Ill-intention

Still, confusion and ignorance could have played a greater role in the preservation of feudal titles to abolished rights than the conscious efforts of agents to justify the

²⁶⁴ AB Vc 3, “Etat des titres et objets recueillis jusqu’à ce jour pour l’histoire, par le bureau du triage des titres, 1 *germinal* VIII (22 March 1800).”

²⁶⁵ Documents were not the only objects preserved for their historical value; there are other instances throughout the Revolution in which the state sought to preserve much larger remnants of the Old Regime. Alexandre Lenoir, guardian of the Deposit of Displaced Works, scanned the remains of churches and convents throughout Paris in an effort to save monuments for their historical value. See Michel Beurdeley, “Le Vandalisme Révolutionnaire,” in *Patrimoine Parisien, 1789-1799: Destructures, Créations, Mutations*, ed. Alfred Fierro and Béatrice de Andia (Paris: Délégation à l’action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1989), 124; The Commission of Historic Monuments, formed in 1790, also functioned as a guardian of historic monuments, and sought to preserve such items as printed books, manuscripts, charters and their seals, antique and modern medallions, carved stones and their inscriptions, statues, busts, bas-reliefs, vases, paintings and other monuments relative to antiquity and to history, “all that tells of natural history,” “anything giving information on the dress and customs/manners of ancient or modern Europeans and other parties of the world.” AB Va 3, “Formation de la Commission des Monuments historiques et Resultat de ses travaux;” AB Vc 3, “Etat des titres et objets recueillis jusqu’à ce jour pour l’histoire, par le bureau du triage des titres, 1 *germinal* VIII (22 March 1800).”

²⁶⁶ Agents mention the keeping of important genealogical papers belonging to former kings, but never mention the preservation of genealogy charts belonging to noble or émigré families. AB Vc 3, “Compte rendu par les membres du Bureau du triage des titres (section domaniale), pendant le mois de *messidor* dernier, *messidor* VI (June/July 1798).”

preservation of these feudal documents for their legal or historical content. The mismanagement of deposits and loss of collections opens the possibility that records were not destroyed consciously, but rather accidentally. There is evidence to make the claim that workers at the Archives nationales, *section domaniale*, and Agence Temporaire des Titres lost documents in transit. On one occasion, for example, the National Archivist, Minister of the Interior, and Agence Temporaire des Titres each believed the other to have had in their possession the documents “of citizen Gaubault, former treasurer of the *Garde* of Paris.” Camus thought the deposit passed from the office of the Minister to the deposit of the Marine, but the Minister denied ever having received such a deposit and inquired the whereabouts of the collection from the agency. Agents responded by saying “there is nothing found concerning the former papers of the *Garde* of Paris.”²⁶⁷ Agents deflected blame of mishandling on their part by accusing vandals for stealing the papers in question, stating that “like many others before them, [these papers] were exposed to the ravages of the Revolution.”²⁶⁸ The agency also added that despite their research, “it was often impossible for [them] to find a trace of the culprits who, for the public good or for their personal interest, had lifted pieces and titles for which [the state] has a need.”²⁶⁹

Vandals indeed sought-after the archives of important families, but missing private papers also resulted from the actions of their noble owners.²⁷⁰ The violence that characterized the early years of the Revolution and the political terror and uncertainty that consumed France under Jacobin rule undoubtedly forced many families to leave the country for more stable lands. While many fled as counter-revolutionaries, still others moved away even if their loyalties remained true to the Revolution. However, their common exodus compelled legislators to label them all as émigrés. And so it is difficult to measure whether the gaps in private archives were caused by vandals or the nobles

²⁶⁷ AB Va 4, “Lettre de Camus au ministre de l’intérieur, 1 *brumaire* IX (23 October 1800);” ABVa4, “Lettre des membres des titres de du Triage des de bureau au ministre de l’intérieur, 29 *brumaire* IX (20 November 1800).”

²⁶⁸ AB Va 4, “Lettre de Camus au ministre de l’intérieur, 1 *brumaire* IX (23 October 1800);” ABVa4, “Lettre des membres des titres de du Triage des de bureau au ministre de l’intérieur, 29 *brumaire* IX (20 November 1800).”

²⁶⁹ AB Va 4, “Lettre de Camus au ministre de l’intérieur, 1 *brumaire* IX (23 October 1800);” ABVa4, “Lettre des membres des titres de du Triage des de bureau au ministre de l’intérieur, 29 *brumaire* IX (20 November 1800).”

²⁷⁰ AB Va 2, “Etat des Cahiers qui mont etre envoyés le 4 Maiy 1790 par M. Camus pour verifier si ces cahiers trouveru d’un mon depot.”

themselves, who deliberately hid or took with them their titles to land, property, privilege, and nobility.

Although there is reason to suspect that the disappearance of papers can be attributed to administrative failures, the action of vandals, and the interests of the documents' owners, there is further evidence to suggest that agents of the Agence Temporaire des Titres may be just as guilty of preserving titles to abolished feudal rights for personal advantage. According to payroll accounts, the nine agents received a substantially higher salary than other workers with similar duties; combined wages of the agency were twice the amount awarded to the *section juridique* and three times the amount for the *section domaniale*.²⁷¹ But letters written by the agency suggest that its workers were in fact disgruntled and disappointed with the state's failure to pay them on time or to pay them at all. Agent Bailly wrote the following in an undated letter to Camus: "You had me work for three months...I say truly before God...that during those three months, I have sacrificed my interests and my health, in the certitude of assuring the survival of my family, conforming to your promises of my employment in your office."²⁷² The agent continued to describe his negative sentiments about the government's treatment of employees and why he chose to leave the work of the triage, stating that "the hardness, the injustice, the irregularity of your proceedings, has forced me to quit this work. I do not believe this to be a reason not to pay me. Another continues the work of the triage I began."²⁷³ The government responded to the discontent of its workers by awarding an extra 2,400 francs for each member of the agency in the spring of 1796.²⁷⁴ But at the same time, they reorganized the Agence Temporaire des Titres into a more permanent office, referred to as the Bureau du Triage des Titres, and reduced the number of agents to carry out the triage from nine to eight.²⁷⁵ Payroll accounts across the years also demonstrate a reduction and fluctuation in the number of workers hired each

²⁷¹ Payroll accounts indicate that the Agence Temporaire des Titres received 196,000, the *section juridique* received 9,240, and the *section domaniale* received 62,300, but we must keep in mind that the agency employed more workers than the other two sections. AF III 29.

²⁷² Bailly seems to be writing around the time of his departure from the agency. He worked from 1 *nivôse* III (21 December 1794) to 1 *ventôse* IX (20 February 1801), Bordier, 75-85; AB II 2, untitled letter from agent Bailly to.

²⁷³ AB II 2, untitled letter from agent Bailly to.

²⁷⁴ Favier, *La mémoire*, 19.

²⁷⁵ See AP 5 *floréal* IV (24 April 1796).

pay period, suggesting that funding was difficult to come by and that workers did not always stay employed with the agency for extended periods of time.

France's war with Europe continued to place strains on the pocketbook of both the government and individual. Agents likewise continued to express their complaints in 1798, declaring on this occasion similar sentiments expressed by agent Bailly that the salary issued by the government did not allow workers to adequately provide for their families. Agents asserted that they "are rendered absolutely incapable of having any other useful occupation" because the nature of the triage required them to spend a great deal of time examining each deposit. They asked the state to not "expose" agents to the idea or necessity of quitting their current job with the agency "in order to find employment in other occupations that can provide for [them] and [their] families."²⁷⁶ By 1800, only six out of eight agents were listed on the payroll, implying that two agents willingly left office for want of more money or better working arrangements.²⁷⁷

Unhappy, frustrated, and poor—agents had ample motive to profit from the smuggling and selling feudal papers that they came across in their inspection of Old Regime deposits. There indeed existed a market for the selling of titles to land and privilege, as well as papers of significant historical value that agents could somehow profit from if they chose to do so.²⁷⁸ And based on the sentiments expressed from agents in these letters, legislators did not give agents alternatives or incentives to remain loyal to the government and to refrain from stealing papers for their personal benefit.²⁷⁹

Feudal Archives that Exist to This Day

So to what extent did agents meet the demands of legislators who authored 7 *messidor* II in 1794 with the intent of destroying titles to abolished feudal rights? Gaps in

²⁷⁶ Favier, *La mémoire*, 19.

²⁷⁷ Only six agents remained in November of 1800 (Blondel père, Rousseau, Jouesne, LePage, Berger, Blondel fils). AB Vc 3.

²⁷⁸ Kircheisen contends that scholars and collectors purchased feudal records from those who raided the Bastille. He supports this claim by pointing to the fact that feudal documents can be found today in repositories scattered across the world. As one example, the State Library at Petrograd holds a collection of records originally held at the archives of the Bastille that were obtained by the Russian Embassy in the late eighteenth-century. Friedrich Kircheisen, *The Grim Bastille*, trans. Arthur Chambers (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1930), 156.

²⁷⁹ This begs us to ask the question: "Why would agents, who had immediate and free access to such desirable goods, act any differently from vandals if lack of money posed serious challenges to the survival of their families?"

the archival record make it difficult for historians to quantify how many feudal titles to nobility and privilege the agency actually destroyed. There are inventoried lists for the type of records the agency preserved, but there are no lists that describe what papers they destroyed.²⁸⁰ Article six of the law of 1794 explicitly stated that agents “will neither make abstracts, nor inventories of the titles” meant for destruction.²⁸¹ Surely agents were preoccupied with the finding of titles to land and property. And it seems equally impractical for legislators to ask agents to make a list of documents perceived to be of no utility to the state. Monthly reports submitted by the agency give us no indication because they all offer the same vague and repetitive statements, such as “all useless papers have been suppressed” or “all feudal documents were gathered to be annihilated.”²⁸² Agents only described the total number of papers sent to refuse, failing to distinguish the number of papers of abolished feudal rights from other documents considered not of any utility to the state.²⁸³

It becomes evident in this examination of the Agence Temporaire des Titres that agents did not and could not destroy all titles to abolished feudal rights. It proves difficult, therefore, to calculate how many feudal records survived the Revolution because of gaps in archival evidence, vague and unclear legislation, and the motives of vandals, nobles, and agents themselves. There is also no means of recording of how many of these papers destined for annihilation existed prior to the Revolution to compare with the number of feudal documents preserved to this day.

There is, however, only one confirmed example that Revolutionaries preserved titles to nobility and privilege; the Committee of Public Instruction justified the preservation of a limited quantity of titles to land, property, and abolished feudal rights because they served as tools of reference “to compare and authenticate papers.”²⁸⁴ The preservation of these feudal records, however, served a strictly practical purpose because

²⁸⁰ AB XXXI 41, “Convention nationale, décret préliminaire par le Comité des décrets, procès-verbaux, et archives, 2 *prairial* III (21 May 1795).”

²⁸¹ AB Vc 3, “Ministre des finances, extrait du registre des discussions du directeur exécutif du 5 *floréal* IV de la République (24 Avril 1796).”

²⁸² AB Vc 3, “Les membres du bureau du triage des titres, du section juridique, au citoyen Camus, garde des Archives nationales, 29 *thermidor* IV (16 August 1796).”

²⁸³ Again, the closest total estimate we have of documents destroyed is “One million, fifty thousand papers and parchments for refuse.” AB Vc 3, “Compte Rendu par les membres du bureau du triages des titres du département de la seine, 27 *fructidor* VIII, (14 September 1800).”

²⁸⁴ ABI 1, untitled memo regarding the agency.

they were kept for reasons of utility. Agents also found many documents “rendered purely feudal” concealed in a collection that “was sent to be conserved.”²⁸⁵ When assessing the many administrative shortcomings demonstrated above, perhaps it is not too farfetched to assume that this discovery of purely feudal titles in other collections happened more often than agents or archivists would have liked to acknowledge.²⁸⁶

It is also difficult to assess the personal opinion and mentalities of agents as they performed the triage; there is nothing written by agents that proves they purposefully preserved feudal titles to nobility and privilege.²⁸⁷ Legislators trusted agency to carry out the law, for there was no mechanism to ensure or validate the complete destruction of all titles to abolished feudal rights. The state, therefore, lingered at the mercy of the monthly reports submitted by agents, making it further obvious that the fate of documents rested in the individual agent, not in the legislation or the hands of legislators.

When contemporary researchers examine the scope of feudal records held in the Archives nationales, they cannot help but take note that feudal titles to land, property, nobility, and privilege exist alongside one another after two centuries of political and cultural transformation. In *Quinze Siècles d'Histoire*, Jean and Lucie Favier showcase photographs of feudal records preserved in the current holdings of the Archives nationales. The Favieres assert that “with some near exceptions, the confiscation of family archives proved ineffective....Some great collections were seized, but the majority were returned....Those documents seized and not returned made up the series T ‘Papers of the Princes’ in the present-day Archives nationales.”²⁸⁸ Their work, in this respect, is an effort to gauge the extent of archival destruction during the Revolution by forcing

²⁸⁵ AB Va 3, “Mémoire sur les lois relatives à l’opération du triage des titres.”

²⁸⁶ AB Va 3, “Mémoire sur les lois relatives à l’opération du triage des titres.”

²⁸⁷ Of the nine original agents, only two have publications listed at the Bibliothèque nationales: Jean Blondel (*Des hommes tels qu'ils sont et doivent être. Ouvrage de sentiment*, 1758); Philippe-Louis Lieble (*Mémoire pour les abbés, prieurs et religieux des abbayes de Saint-Vincent du Mans, de Saint-Martin...*, 1764; *Mémoire sur les limites de l'empire de Charlemagne*, 1764; *Observations sur les deux Lettres adressées à un supérieur général par un religieux de son ordre, à l'occasion de la réforme des réguliers*, 1768; *Nouvelle rhétorique française, à l'usage des jeunes personnes*; 1803).

²⁸⁸ Although their book provides a detailed history of the Archives nationales, the Favieres avoid discussion of archival destruction and the political motives driving revolutionary legislation regarding the Archives. Favier, *Quinze Siècles*, 17.

scholars to acknowledge the current content of the Archives nationales and to recognize that feudal documents indeed survived the Revolution unharmed.²⁸⁹

The challenges presented by the triage of Old Regime deposits confirm that not all attempts to rationalize, systematize, and improve efficiency in the new revolutionary state actually succeeded.²⁹⁰ The long, tedious, and often overwhelming process of sorting documents, in itself, proved difficult for the Agence Temporaire des Titres to tackle. Even so, the inherent nature of their inspection and the variability of their decisions brought forth more challenges in our evaluation of archival destruction. Therefore, it is important for scholars to recognize the internal conflicts and contradictions facing agents in order to avoid making the assumption that agents completed the triage without any difficulties.

Although the basic duties of the agents remained unchanged even as the political environment of revolutionary France altered over time, agents still had to reconcile the contradictions inherent in the triage process. Over the course of their six years of service, agents grappled with the idea that while feudal titles to abolished rights did not offer financial revenue, they could in fact provide legal utility to the state or they could serve as valuable markers of the French past. The work of the Agence Temporaire des Titres is one example showing the disconnection between law and practice.

In practice, we also see that the agency was more concerned with the conservation of titles to land and property than the destruction of titles to abolished feudal rights or “useless” papers. While revolutionaries in 1794 grounded the law of 7 *messidor* II on an ideological necessity to erase the memory of the feudal past, archival evidence demonstrates an eventual decline in the emphasis on destruction as more moderate revolutionaries emerged after the fall of Robespierre. As financial instability and the threat of bankruptcy continued to place strains on the Republic, the push to annihilate feudal papers decreased as pressure to locate and conserve documents that could offer revenue to the state increased. Agents sought to preserve only those documents which

²⁸⁹ Favier, *Quinze Siècles*, 17, 22.

²⁹⁰ Although agents did obtain many documents of legal, financial, and historical value by 1801, Burke and Taine would be inclined to criticize revolutionaries for being overly obsessed with rationality and standardization and would highlight the inability of the agents to guarantee a sound, secure, and consistent means of destroying titles to nobility and privilege as an example of revolutionary failure.

served in “the interest of all the Republic,” which meant that they continued to discard titles of nobility and privilege, not necessarily as an ideological attack on the Old Regime, but definitely as a practical measure to clear up space in the Archives nationales for documents deemed “useful” to the state.²⁹¹ The triage existed not necessarily as an ideological battleground on which to wage war against the Old Regime or the cleansing of the historical heritage of France; instead, the triage continued as a strategy of financial necessity—of finding records that could consolidate the state’s land holdings and bring fiscal security to the revolutionary cause.

²⁹¹ AB I 1, “Rapport et Decree de Projet, présenté au nom du committee de domaines finances et legislation sur l’organisation des Archives nationales, by Louis-Prosper Lofficial, 5 mai 1793.”

CONCLUSION

A major goal of this interpretation was to build upon and assess existing scholarship on the Archives nationales during the Revolution. In doing so, we come to find that historians interpret the developments of the Archives nationales along the same lines as revisionist historians, such as François Furet and Keith Baker, interpret the Revolution as a whole—as a movement driven by politics and ideology, not economics or social conflict. Studies on the revolutionary handling of feudal records indeed vary, but central to all arguments is the notion that ideology shaped the laws governing the Archives and the Agence Temporaire des Titres. Scholars identify the laws mandating archival destruction in 1792, 1793, and 1794 as ideological expressions of the Revolution’s political supremacy over the Old Regime.²⁹² The destruction of feudal documents thus reflected a popular revolutionary outlook of the world—an ideological rejection of the Old Regime and all objects that perpetuated the emblems of feudal vanity and pride.

But by looking solely at the political or ideological factors motivating archival destruction, historians of the Archives nationales fall into the same trap as their revisionist counterparts; they forget to recognize that there were alternative forces and motives at play. Indeed, revolutionaries in 1794 asserted that titles of nobility and privilege damaged the sanctity of the Archives nationales because of the documents’ association with the “abhorrent” feudal past. But in practice, agents only carried out the destruction of feudal documents as a secondary priority. Scholars misrepresent the aim of the triage when they say that agents were first concerned with the destruction of feudal titles. Instead, it is more accurate to say that revolutionaries shaped the triage to provide the most efficient means of obtaining titles to land and property, supporting an ideology of practicality and fiscal necessity to a greater extent than the ideological push to destroy records as a political attack on feudalism.

This particular study of the Archives nationales reminds us that there was more driving the creation of 7 *messidor* II and the triage of Old Regime deposits than simply

²⁹² The nationalization of church lands and confiscation of archival deposits in 1790 likewise illustrated the supremacy of the revolutionary state over the clergy because the state could now sell off ecclesiastical lands as *Bien Nationaux*.

ideology. And so it is, in a small way, a return to an appreciation of the role that economics played in shaping political action and behavior. The handling of feudal archives reveals much about the political and fiscal insecurities that concerned legislators throughout the decade of the Revolution. By examining the process of the triage more closely, readers come to understand that agents were more concerned with finding feudal documents that merited preservation than finding feudal documents destined for annihilation. Legislators universally acknowledged the fiscal shortcomings that contributed to the fall of the Old Regime. They likewise regarded the agency as a valuable asset to the nation, believing that the financial stability of the state, to a large degree, rested on the successful recovery of titles to land and property.

These titles to land and property created under and validated by the Old Regime became valuable commodities even at a time when revolutionaries struggled so fervently to disassociate themselves from the practices and customs of the feudal past. But despite their objection to the Old Regime, the government honored these titles to property in the new state in order to generate a profit for the Revolution. The agency, therefore, illustrates how economic matters drove policy and reemphasizes the notion that financial wealth and stability is at the root of political power. Financial necessity, to a greater degree than ideological zeal against feudalism, therefore compelled legislators to maintain the triage of Old Regime deposits until 1801.

Historians have also failed to recognize that the triage of documents is one indicator of continuity in a Revolution often characterized by inconsistency. We can see how legislators, despite their political differences, continued to support an agency created under Jacobin rule over the remaining six years of the Revolution because the triage satisfied the political and financial initiatives of the revolutionary state; each successive party in office did not perceive the triage as evidence of Jacobin zeal and irrationality, but rather as a logical, systematized way of sorting and organizing collections that came into the Archives nationales.

Moreover, a closer examination of the practices and challenges faced by the agency indicates to us a disconnection between legislative order and practice. Scholars fail to see how economics, matters of contingency, and bureaucratic clumsiness altered the actual outcome of the triage because they focus solely on the ideological factors that

motivated the creation of 7 *messidor* II and neglect an understanding of the actual practices carried out by the agency. Instead, we should follow the example set by Timothy Tackett, who emphasizes the contingency of revolutionary events. Rather than identifying the Revolution as foreordained as revisionists often do, we can illustrate how much more complicated and unpredictable the work of the Agence was in reality and how the priorities of the agency differed greatly from what legislators in 1794 originally intended.

We must recognize that the vague and unclear wording of 7 *messidor* II allowed for more interpretation on the agent's part than legislators would have liked to admit. Agents indeed made conscious efforts to preserve only those records that the law permitted them to keep, yet the actual decision to destroy a record rested in the personal judgment of each agent on the document's utility or contribution to the state. Even if agents could work under ideal conditions, such that they had an infinite amount of time to complete their task, differences in opinion and interpretation would still have existed; there was no feasible way for nine individuals to examine a document in the same way. The discrepancies, inconsistencies, and challenges faced by each agent in the triage therefore suggest to us the possibility that feudal titles to abolished rights indeed survived the Revolution unharmed.

Another important feature of this portrait of the Archives nationales is the connection between record keeping, historical scholarship, and social memory. The destruction of feudal documents, the rejection of the Old Regime past, and the creation of revolutionary identity were all intended to shape the social perception of the past, much in the same way that Gildea and Nora have discussed other episodes of French history. On the whole, scholars refuse to admit that revolutionaries were ignorant of their mandates to destroy feudal archives, believing that legislators clearly understood the link between archives and history and the preservation of feudal documents for the recalling of past events.²⁹³ Indeed, legislators across the Revolution understood that history and

²⁹³ The Faviers recognize the nationalization and seizure of Old Regime deposits as a means to consolidate important archives for the national memory, which portrays revolutionaries as agents who understood this link between archives and historical scholarship. Lucie Favier, *La Mémoire De L'état : Histoire Des Archives Nationales* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 10; Richard Cox, *Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management* (Greenwood: Greenwood Press, 2000), 127. Other authors made direct claims that revolutionaries were aware that they were destroying sources of history and

social memory were born from the archives; records were identified as the “raw materials of history” and the Archives nationales was the gateway to historical scholarship.²⁹⁴ With the elimination of feudal records, revolutionaries could release France from the irrational and embarrassing memory of the nation’s immediate past that they often labeled as “an insult to ‘reason.’”²⁹⁵ Revolutionaries could concentrate instead on the making of a revolutionary legacy and a history concerned only with the accomplishments of the present generation.

The popular and legislative attempts to destroy documents created under the Old Regime therein allow historians to understand what events in French history the nation collectively wanted to forget. The removal of titles to abolished feudal rights in the triage process that began in 1794 was an aggressive means of clearing society’s memory of French “barbarism” and of paving the way for a new beginning in the “enlightened” mindset.²⁹⁶ The creation of new repositories and destruction of old records thus confirmed the survival of the revolutionary identity.

It is evident that the history of the Archives nationales connects to larger currents and debates of the Revolution. The acquisition, triage, and organization of records were topics of significant concern for legislators, regardless of their different political affiliations. The destruction of feudal archives was one means used by the public and legislature to validate the defeat of aristocratic power and to prevent a return to the economic, social, and political structure of feudalism. The public burning of feudal documents also adds to our understanding of an emerging revolutionary culture that materialized in the form of festivals and celebratory performances. But the creation of the agency under the law of 7 *messidor* II signified the ultimate transformation of the

manipulating the historical record of events. See Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 31, no. 1 (January 1968), Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution," *The American Archivist* 59 (Winter 1996), Randolph Starn, "Truth in the Archives," *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 2 (2002).

²⁹⁴ Panitch, 46. Cited from Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7-25.

²⁹⁵ Gautherot, v Jacobin book

²⁹⁶ Duchein, 18. Cited from L. de Laborde, *Les Archives de la France pendant la Révolution Française* (Paris : J. Claye, 1866). “Never has there been such a will to escape from history” stated historian James O’Toole . James O’ Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 238; Scholars also link the destruction of feudal archives with the larger assault on symbols of the Old Regime as evidence of the Jacobin “the doctrine of ‘tabula rasa.’” See Gautherot, *Vandalisme Jacobin*, 20.

Archives nationales into a political instrument of the revolutionary state—whereby legislators could shape the laws governing the Archives to fulfill their ideological, political, historical, and fiscal interests. Hence, the Archives nationales is not a neutral site of information; it was a site of conflict between past and present regimes, between advocates of archival destruction and preservation, and between remembering and forgetting. Nor is the Archives nationales simply a repository of information for the writing of other histories. The Archives nationales has a history all its own—a history tied firmly to revolutionary ideology, pragmatism, and fiscal necessity, and one that elevates our understanding of the political, economic, and cultural developments that propelled the Revolution forward.

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AP 29 July 1789

AP 19 June 1790

AP 20 June 1790

AP 12 August 1790

AP 1 July 1790

AP 4 September 1790

AP 7 September 1790

AP 12 September 1790

AP 13 October 1791

AP 20 December 1791

AP 27 December 1791

AP Annexes 1791

AP 31 March 1792

AP 12 May 1792

AP 13 July 1793

AP 7 *messidor* II (25 June 1794)

AP 5 *floréal* IV (24 April 1796)

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katherine Cox is a native Floridian. She moved from North Miami to Winter Haven at age fifteen and graduated from Winter Haven High School in 2003. She entered the University of Florida in the fall of 2003 with junior-standing. Katherine received her Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Political Science with a minor in Philosophy in December of 2005. She was an active student leader during her two years at the University of Florida, serving on the executive board of the Inter-Residence Hall Association and working as a Resident Advisor in Yulee Hall.

Katherine began her graduate career at Florida State University in the spring of 2006, with a major concentration in eighteenth-century French history and minor study in Historical Administration and Public History. She presented papers on the topic of the Archives nationales at the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era in spring of 2007 and at the Society for the Study of French History conference in Scotland the following summer. Her conference paper “Corridors of Power: The Archives Nationales, 1789-1794” is scheduled to be published in the 2007 edition of *Selected Papers from the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, 1750-1850*.

Katherine is also a member of the Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution and was fortunate enough to obtain funding to spend two months researching at the Archives nationales in Paris. She currently resides in Tallahassee and plans to pursue a Ph. D. in History after taking a short hiatus.