

# General Schedules and Federal Records

By ISADORE PERLMAN

*Records Management Division  
National Archives and  
Records Service*

**T**HE National Archives Act of 1934 provided that Federal agencies had to obtain the approval of the Archivist of the United States and Congress before they could destroy Government records. By 1941 it had become clear that individual agencies were submitting for approval year after year repetitious disposal lists affecting the same types of records, thus causing excessive paper work for themselves, the National Archives, and Congress. Therefore Congress passed the Records Disposal Act of 1943, which authorized agencies to submit disposal schedules to the Archivist. Such schedules, when approved, permitted agencies periodically to dispose of certain specified series of records continuously created, thus making unnecessary the repeated submission of disposal lists covering them.

The National Archives anticipated a flood of schedules from the agencies as a result of this legislation, but the flood never came. By October 1944 schedules had been received from but 26 agencies, and only 6 agencies had scheduled an appreciable portion of their records. Consequently the National Archives decided to seek amendment of the disposal act which would permit the Archivist himself to initiate schedules covering records common to several or all agencies of the Government. In proposing changes in the law, the Archivist wrote to the Director of the Bureau of the Budget on October 19, 1944, that

... failure on the part of Government agencies to schedule for disposal records of temporary value means that these records and similar records that are now being and hereafter will be created will either be retained beyond the period of their temporary usefulness or repetitious disposal lists will have to be prepared at frequent intervals to cover them. Either procedure is indeed costly and involves needless and unjustifiable expenditures of public funds.

The Bureau approved the Archivist's proposals and they became a part of the disposal act on July 6, 1945.

Two sections of the amended disposal act relate to the preparation and issuance of what are now called general schedules. Section 4 provides that

the Archivist may . . . submit to Congress . . . at such times as he may deem expedient, schedules proposing the disposal, after the lapse of specified periods of time, of records of a specified form or character common to several or all agencies that have either accumulated or may accumulate in such agencies and that apparently will not, after the lapse of the periods specified, have sufficient administrative, legal, research, or other value to warrant their further preservation by the United States Government.

Section 6 provides that general schedules are permissive, not mandatory, i.e., agencies are encouraged to destroy records covered by such schedules after the retention periods specified by the schedules have elapsed, but they are not required to do so. When the amendments were under consideration the Bureau of the Budget argued that it was illogical to issue standards for the disposal of records common to the agencies and at the same time to make the application of those standards permissive. The National Archives successfully held, however, that agencies must be in a position to interpret disposal authorizations in terms of their own administrative circumstances.

Under the authority of the amended disposal act, the National Archives developed and issued seven general schedules which covered the following types of records:

- No. 1 Records relating to civilian personnel, issued March 13, 1946, and revised May 26, 1947.
- No. 2 Records relating to the deferment of Federal employees from military service, issued March 13, 1946.
- No. 3 Records of informational services and relations with the public, issued May 23, 1946.
- No. 4 Agency mail and postal records, not including those of the Post Office Department, issued August 7, 1946.
- No. 5 Fiscal and accounting records, issued August 7, 1946.
- No. 6 Bankruptcy records of United States Courts of Bankruptcy, issued July 7, 1947.
- No. 7 Health records of Federal employees, issued May 15, 1950.

#### PREPARATION OF GENERAL SCHEDULES

The development and issuance of general schedules is based on the premise that Federal records fall into two broad categories:

- (a) Those which reflect the substantive functions of agencies in accomplishing the missions assigned to them by the Congress and the President. These records will normally be subjected to detailed appraisal and analysis,

and will yield any records of archival value to be designated for permanent retention,

(b) Those which reflect the fiscal and administrative management of agencies. General schedules, on the whole, are concerned with the disposal of the records in this category, for it is records of this type that normally are common to all agencies of the Government.

General schedules represent a reduction to the lowest common denominator of certain types of records found in all or several agencies of the Government; and they enable the records officer to appraise validly all records similar in form and purpose regardless of what agency possesses them. This common denominator has been made somewhat easier to achieve because certain Federal staff organizations have demanded standardization of record keeping in the operating agencies. Thus the Civil Service Commission, through the *Federal Personnel Manual* and other issuances, has standardized the methods of maintaining Federal personnel records. The Treasury Department, the Budget Bureau, the General Accounting Office, and the General Services Administration — agencies which share the staff coordination and direction of the fiscal and administrative management activities of the Government — have also tended to standardize agency record keeping for those activities. General schedules are not limited, however, to those types of records for which record keeping has been standardized. In general, records arising from functions common to several agencies are covered by such schedules, but records peculiar to a single agency reflecting a Government-wide function are *not* included.

Although uniformity of record keeping in the major "house-keeping" activities of the Federal Government has been the principal factor facilitating the scheduling of records common to agencies, authorized local agency variations in procedures have made difficult the formulation of instructions intended to apply to the Government generally. Although pay-rolling and pay administration functions have been standardized for most agencies of the Government by *General Regulations* No. 102 of the Comptroller General, some agencies, with his approval, use locally developed forms and procedures, while others process their pay rolls in accordance with procedures varying from the regulations. Because of these variations from the norm the wording of a general schedule relating to pay records must be sufficiently adroit to cover the internal differences and yet not lose force and meaning.

The preparation of a general schedule involves a thorough

analysis of the functions of agencies in relation to the records to be scheduled. Such an analysis poses and answers the following questions:

- a. To what extent do the records possess uniformity of physical characteristics?
- b. To what extent are the records prescribed by staff management agencies of the Federal Government, and what values do they possess for the staff agencies that require them?
- c. If not prescribed, how are the records similar from agency to agency?
- d. What role do the records play in the administrative procedures and management of each agency?
- e. To what extent do the records possess legal values which will influence their retention or disposal?
- f. Will any of the records be eligible for transfer to a Federal Records Center but not yet eligible for disposal when they become inactive?<sup>1</sup>
- g. Will any records possess values meriting preservation in the National Archives when they become inactive?

The answers to these questions provide a substantial clue to the value of the records to be scheduled. Following this analysis, a retention period for each type of record is stated in terms of the lowest period consistent with its value. Because of the permissive nature of the general schedule, agency records officers may designate and request authority to lengthen or shorten the retention periods specified in a general schedule, but they are encouraged to follow the prescribed periods wherever possible.

General schedules originally supplied only instructions for the *disposal* of records. The program responsibilities of the National Archives and Records Service as defined in the Federal Records Act of 1950 dictated a wider scope for such schedules. Consequently, in addition to disposal provisions, they now include data on:

(1) *Recommended methods of filing* — Agencies are provided with a recommended method of filing consistent with normal operating needs for each type of record listed in a general schedule. These recommendations are designed to facilitate the disposal of the records after the prescribed retention period has elapsed. When records are filed in accordance with special instructions issued by staff agency directives the general schedule merely cites the applicable directive.

<sup>1</sup> This question was not one that was considered in the preparation of the general schedules prior to the passage of the Federal Records Act of 1950, and the establishment of Federal Records Centers.

(2) *Records of continuing value* — The designation of “records of continuing value” in general schedules is based on the authority given to the Administrator of General Services by the Federal Records Act of 1950 to “establish standards for the selective retention of records of continuing value, and assist Federal agencies in applying such standards to records in their custody.” “Continuing value,” referring to records the administrative utility of which makes necessary their retention, is not necessarily equated with “archival value,” however. The disposal of records covered by general schedules is normally predicated either on the fact that the records will lose their administrative or legal value after the lapse of a specified period of time, or on the fact that the matters they document are adequately recorded in other records to be retained indefinitely. Therefore, general schedules now list the records that are considered to be of continuing value as distinguished from those related to them that are considered to be of temporary value. For example, in the recently revised General Schedule No. 1, which covers Federal records relating to civilian personnel, official personnel folders and employee pay and service record cards are listed for retention while most of the other personnel records are listed for disposal.

(3) *Utilization of Federal Records Centers* — The National Archives and Records Service has now placed in active operation eight Federal Records Centers. These centers serve as intermediate depositories for records that should be retained only briefly in expensive office space but which can not be destroyed or transferred to the National Archives for some time to come. General schedules have therefore been made a vehicle through which agencies are encouraged to send to the centers (a) records designated by the general schedules as being of continuing value but not sufficiently active to be retained in agency operating space; (b) records that are disposable but have not yet reached disposal age; or (c) records that are suitable for eventual transfer to the National Archives but which are still too active to warrant deposit with that agency. Although the centers stand ready to receive files at such times as facilities permit, the schedules recommend orderly and periodic transfers. Thus, the transfer period recommended for contract files is 3 years after the files are closed; but the period for pay and personnel records varies according to their administrative and legal values.

(4) *Number of copies* — Under authority of the Federal Records Act of 1950 the National Archives and Records Service is

responsible for "analyzing, developing, promoting, and coordinating standards, procedures and techniques designed to improve the management of records." General schedules are therefore used as one method of promulgating standards to eliminate the creation of superfluous copies of forms and other papers. The Comptroller General, who, in conjunction with the Budget Bureau and the Treasury Department, is authorized by law to prescribe fiscal and accounting systems, has not concerned himself with the problem of agency copies. General Schedule No. 5, now being revised, covers the fiscal, accounting, and supply records of the Federal Government and will designate for each type of record listed the maximum number of record copies that apparently must be created to achieve good administration. By this recommendation the National Archives and Records Service hopes to discourage the creation of copies in excess of normal administrative needs. Administrative requirements may vary, of course, with the size and complexity of the operating agency, but all copies created in addition to those vested with records status in the schedule will be disposable after shorter retention periods than those specified for the record copies.

(5) *Designation of record copies* — Archivists and records management specialists have found that a "no man's land" exists in which files may be designated either as record or nonrecord material depending on the immediate purposes served by them. Such designations are made by the agency concerned. In accordance with authority granted the National Archives and Records Service by the Federal Records Act of 1950, the general schedules will provide the agency with the basis for such determination, particularly in instances where record keeping is fairly well standardized. Thus, in General Schedule No. 5, the designation of record copies is associated with recommendations as to the minimum number of record copies of each required fiscal, accounting, or supply form. For example, two record copies are suggested for travel orders — one to be held by the operating transportation unit preparing, authorizing, and issuing the orders; the other to be held by the fiscal unit primarily interested in the payment for the travel performed and in the accounting for such payment in the books of the agency.

(6) *Justification for authorized disposition* — Attached to each general schedule are statements indicating the legal, administrative, and historical value of each item covered by the schedule. These statements constitute appraisals of the records involved and are justifications for the authorized retirement of the records listed in the body of the schedule. They are based on a detailed study

both of the directives requiring the maintenance of the records and of the value of the records to the Government and to the people. They point out subject-content or physical duplication of records and any other factors which affect the determination of retention periods.

The general schedules that have already been prepared and put into operation, including those in process of revision, cover an impressive volume of Federal records. For example, General Schedule No. 1, revised, will accomplish the disposition of about 1½ million cubic feet of personnel records, while General Schedule No. 5, revised, will make possible the disposal of about 2 million cubic feet of fiscal, accounting, and supply records. The other general schedules now in use raise the total figure of records disposable under their provisions to almost 4 million cubic feet. This figure, placed against the more than 23½ million cubic feet of records now estimated to be in Federal custody, is perhaps not too significant. But the use of general schedules in the records management program of each agency yields other results in records analyses and scheduling that are not readily calculable.

#### SOME PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING GENERAL SCHEDULES

Records listed in general schedules are those normally found in operating agencies. This does not mean, however, that every agency must maintain all the records listed if they are not required by the regulations of some Federal staff authority. To make the general schedules cover a group of records common to all or several agencies as efficiently and specifically as possible, however, involves many problems and has occasioned some revision, as illustrated below.

Records covered by General Schedule No. 5 as issued in 1946 are listed by form number. Disposal periods are indicated for each form and, in some instances, the papers that are filed with it. For obvious reasons scheduling by form number has not proved satisfactory. Consequently, in revising the schedule the National Archives and Records Service has decided to arrange the entries on this schedule to reflect the manner in which the records are normally created, i.e., by type of transaction. In short, the revision will emphasize the purpose for which each type of record is maintained rather than its nature in terms of form numbers. As revised, a single item in the schedule will pertain to the disposition of virtually

all contract and other procurement files in the Government — about 1½ million cubic feet of records!

In the past, agency record copies of vouchers have been considered to be the memorandum copies retained after the original vouchers were forwarded to the General Accounting Office as supporting papers to disbursing returns. With the adoption of the new type of on-the-site audit, however, some agencies are finding that their memorandum copies are now superfluous because they are also maintaining the original vouchers for the General Accounting Office in agency space. Several agencies, such as the General Services Administration, have gone one step further and have eliminated vouchers altogether in most procurement transactions by making the vendor's invoice do double duty as an itemized statement of services rendered or materials purchased and as a voucher document. The final elimination of vouchers, however, must await further study and therefore their elimination was not included as a recommendation in the pending revision of General Schedule No. 5.

Temporary interests of the government may affect disposal provisions incorporated in general schedules. For example, the General Accounting Office normally permits disposal of copies of bills of lading 3 to 5 years after their issuance. Recently that Office has been engaged in several reaudit programs of freight charges paid by the government, particularly those of the World War II period, which require its examination of freight files of all agencies for the World War II years and in some instances, as early as 1931. Therefore in the pending revision of General Schedule No. 5 the National Archives and Records Service will have no alternative but to designate agency copies of bills of lading and all supporting papers as records of continuing value that must be retained indefinitely either in agency space or in one of the Federal Records Centers. The justification for authorized disposition, appended to this schedule, will point out that the appraisal is temporary and that, once the General Accounting Office audits are completed and the legal situation with respect to the freight records is clarified, specific retention periods will be determined.

Another problem frequently met with in the preparation of general schedules arises from the fact that although a type of record may be common to all or several agencies, the nature of that record may be affected by varying administrative practices. For example, item 5 of General Schedule No. 1, as revised, covers "correspondence in the operating personnel office and its subordinate units re-

lating to their administration and operation." A 3-year retention period is provided for such correspondence. Surveys have revealed, however, that the content of correspondence files of this type varies from agency to agency. Some correspondence files contain only the most routine administrative material, while others contain more significant material such as reports on civilian personnel to the Civil Service Commission. These reports are covered by item 22 of the same schedule and are disposable after only 2 years. Since the schedule could not be worded to cover all situations, it was finally decided to make each agency records officer responsible for adapting the schedule to his agency's requirements. If personnel reports are filed separately in the personnel office his disposition of them presumably would be governed by item 22. If they are filed with administrative correspondence disposition could be governed by either item 5 or item 22.

Prior to 1949 schedules were largely restricted to records involving clearly defined operating areas. As revisions go forward, however, several subject-matter areas will be telescoped to effect an economy of issuances. For example, General Schedule No. 1, issued in 1946 and revised in 1947, provided for the disposition of personnel records normally found in agency personnel offices. The 1951 revision, however, schedules in a single document all records affecting the service history of Federal employees — employment, pay, and health records. General Schedule No. 7, which covered health records exclusively, has been made a part of the new schedule.

#### APPLICATION OF GENERAL SCHEDULES

An agency's application of general schedules involves incorporation of the provisions of the schedules into the comprehensive, detailed schedules developed by the agency records officer. It is his responsibility to adapt the authorizations granted by general schedules and to apply them in his own agency. The permissive nature of schedules provides him with flexible disposition periods and recommendations for the maintenance of files to suit his agency's needs. An agency records officer is not expected to present the general schedules to operating personnel in the form in which he receives them. The fact that the records of one agency differ from those of another in some detail, although they are sufficiently similar to encourage the development of general schedules, requires that the records officer undertake at least a minimum degree of editing in order to adapt the schedules to conditions prevailing

within his own agency. For example, certain agency administrative or fiscal audits may be in progress, or claims may be pending, that make necessary the temporary retention of given records disposable under a general schedule. In case of a conflict between agency authorization and general schedule authorization affecting the same records, the records officer must decide which of the two to use. In short, he must adapt general schedules to the particular administrative and legal situations obtaining in his own agency.

In one vital respect the authorizations granted the agency records officer by general schedules are not final. The Comptroller General, exercising his prerogatives under section 9 of the Records Disposal Act requires that any records pertaining to accounts, claims, or demands involving the Government of the United States that have not been settled or adjusted in the General Accounting Office may not be disposed of without prior permission from that agency. Under this proviso it is the responsibility of every agency records officer to be aware of such records and to prevent their disposal while settlements are pending. In determining the disposal periods specified in general schedules, the National Archives and Records Service has always considered the possibility of claims arising that would involve the United States Government. Therefore the Comptroller's approval of general schedules is obtained to ensure the incorporation of his desires with respect to the maintenance and disposition of records in which he has a statutory interest and which may relate to claims. References in general schedules to the requirements for the disposal of records involving "accounts, claims, or demands," are an additional reminder to the records officer of his responsibility to obtain written approvals from the Comptroller General whenever necessary.

The general schedule, properly utilized within an agency, can be a device no less important than other administrative tools forming the basis of the agency records management program. The greatest quantity of an agency's records are likely to be "housekeeping" records. This term, through custom and usage, has come to describe those records documenting such functions as procurement, accounting, supply, and personnel. Thus the Post Office Department and the Federal Security Agency create essentially the same kinds of "housekeeping" records, but the files documenting the programs of these agencies are vastly different in content and structure. By judicious use of general schedules a records officer can quickly schedule his agency's routine records, thus freeing himself to devote his energies to the proper evaluation and scheduling of the pro-

gram records, which contain the "archival core." This fact is highly significant since the Federal Records Act of 1950 requires agency heads to document adequately agency programs and decisions.

The general schedule will not in itself serve as a substitute for the prosecution of an agency records management program. Records inventories must still be conducted. An inventory of an agency's fiscal and personnel records, for example, may uncover many records peculiar to that agency which are not covered by general schedules. These records must be scheduled by the agency, however, in the interest of administrative efficiency. In scheduling them the records officer may use as a guide the data on retention periods, records maintenance, and creation techniques, as well as legal authorizations, supplied by the general schedules. Furthermore, the data in general schedules can be utilized in the agency's records management program to reduce the number of copies of records created, to prescribe the manner of maintenance of the records, and to obtain full utilization of the authorized retention periods.

#### CONCLUSION

The importance of general schedules to Federal records specialists is twofold: (1) to the archivist they present tailor-made appraisals of a substantial segment of the records of the Federal Government; (2) to the records management specialist they present not only appraisals but also standards and aids in solving some of his major records management problems.

General schedules make it unnecessary for the archivist to appraise large masses of records in which records of archival value are not likely to be found; and they enable him to devote his critical faculties to a more detailed appraisal of those records that document the programs and decisions of Government agencies.

The permissive nature of the general schedules in no way lessens their potential effectiveness as a records management tool. They provide the National Archives and Records Service with a yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of such agency programs and enable the agencies themselves to set their own program standards. The agency records officer who does not utilize the general schedules is expected, in the event of a program audit, to have scheduled the records in his custody by his own analysis and appraisal in the light of the data contained in the general schedule, or to be able to point out the factors peculiar to his agency which preclude the use of the general schedules.

Figures are not available on the number of agencies which have used the general schedules since they first appeared in 1946. Most of the agencies with major records accumulations have, however, incorporated various general schedule items into their own schedules, with appropriate amendments and interpretations, and several agencies have used them with little or no change. It is anticipated that the increased records management responsibilities of Federal agencies, as outlined in the Federal Records Act of 1950, will bring about a progressively greater use of the general schedules, with substantial savings and more efficient administration as the result.

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