

# Spanish Origins of the National Archives of the Philippines (A Historical Article)\*

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## Abstract

*The National Archives of the Philippines (NAP) was officially established by the American colonial authorities on 21 October 1901, but its origins are rooted in the Spanish rule of the country (1565-1898). Today, it holds about 60 million pieces of records, more than 18.8 million of which were produced during the said rule (NAP, Memorandum No. 121528). Using government reports, contemporary accounts, and NAP's collections, this paper explains the beginnings of NAP, how those 18 million pieces of Spanish records were created and preserved for centuries, and what the contents and intents of those records are. It also cites through those records the important role that the Spanish rulers had in the formation of the Filipino nation, like the establishment of villages, towns, and provinces; the construction of roads, bridges, ports, and public buildings; and the maintenance of public safety and health.*

**Keywords:** Archives, Philippine archives, Spanish origins of Philippine archives, Spanish archives in the Philippines

## BACKGROUND

The National Archives of the Philippines is a government agency that is mandated by law (Republic Act No. 9470) to serve two functions: *archives administration* (to acquire, store, and preserve public and private records) and *records management* (to appraise, retain, and dispose of public records). In fulfilling its duties, it is empowered to plan, formulate, and implement policies, standards, guidelines, and programs; to undertake research projects and cause their publication; to give technical assistance to other government agencies; and to conduct seminars and trainings. All government agencies cannot dispose of their records without its proper approval. Its main

offices and depositories are located in Manila, and it has regional branches in Cebu City (for the Visayas) and Davao City (for Mindanao).

## Spanish Archives

The Spaniards arrived in the Philippines on 16 March 1521, but they would begin their rule of the archipelago four more decades later—on 27 April 1565, when the Spanish Conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legaspi founded the colonial government with Cebu as its capital. In 1572, the capital was transferred to Manila and had remained there since then.

The maintenance of Spanish rule in the Philippine Islands obliged the creation, acquisition, and

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storage of records. As shown by the records that the Spanish archives amassed in over three centuries, the colonial government had to create decrees, circulars, and letters for the conduct of its affairs. It had to receive royal orders from the king of Spain; reports from the provinces, towns, and villages of the archipelago; and petitions for public works. It had to communicate frequently with the Roman Catholic Church on the matters affecting the State. Its decision would also be the Church's decision. As the years progressed, many of the records created and acquired kept piling up at government offices in Intramuros, the walled city of Manila. Thus began the establishment and management of archives and records.

It can be observed from the movement of history that the first Spanish records were shipped from Mexico, since Spain ruled the Philippine Islands as a vice royalty of that Spanish colony. The records emanated from the mother country, Spain, and later on also from Mexico. They arrived in the Philippine Islands by ships. Upon embarking at the fort of Manila, the documents were loaded into wagons and hauled to the repositories in Intramuros.

The other records came from the *encomiendas* or land grants that the Spanish government gave to Spanish soldiers or civilians. The Spanish *encomenderos* (land grant holders) forwarded to Manila reports on the geography and other features of the land grants, the condition of the population inhabiting the land grants, and *tributos* (taxes) collected from the population. The reports also contained the ethnography, old beliefs and practices, the conversion to Catholic faith, security, legal disputes, and progress of the land grants' population (Loarca, 1882/1903).

When the *encomiendas* expanded to become barrios (villages), *sitios* (isolated barrios), *pueblos* (towns), and *provincias* (provinces), more reports were sent to Manila. As seen in the archival records, there were requests for the construction of public buildings, roads, highways, bridges, and other infrastructures. During the delivery, the records were kept in wagons or carriages drawn by horses. Those coming from the Visayas and Mindanao had to be transported through boats and other ocean-going vessels.

The Spanish missionaries—the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, and Augustinians—explored the places where Spanish rule had been set up. They preached the Catholic faith, baptized the natives, and

supervised the construction of churches. The Spanish archives contained papal bulls, ecclesiastical letters, and reports on the performance of the Church's part in governing the Philippine Islands.

#### *Órdenes Reales*

The *órdenes reales* (royal decrees and orders) sent from Spain contained instructions from the Spanish king on matters concerning the Philippine Islands. The American historian, librarian, and archivist Worthington C. Ford, in a paper he wrote in 1904, made his personal observations of what these royal records were:

*These original royal decrees and orders number about 18,000 pieces, and are of the highest historical importance. Many bear the royal seal, many carry the royal signature, and many are stamped by the wooden block reproducing the King's signature. The higher officials of state also signed, with their characteristic flourishes or rubrics, and the formal nature of papers, taken with the fact that so many are printed documents, signed in manuscript, shows that they were of a circular character, doubtless sent to the governors of all the leading Spanish colonies. The uncertainties of tending and receiving of these orders led to the dispatch of two, or, in a year of war, even of five copies by different vessels, and each document is signed in all formality.*

*The connection between the Spanish court and the Papacy was most intimate, and papal bulls, letters, decrees, admonitions, or commendations are of frequent occurrence. The inclosures in the royal letters are often of greater interest than the letters themselves.*

*Dispatches passing between Spain and her great rivals, England and France, play an important part in these papers in the earlier years, and the commercial and religious questions receive full treatment so far as general laws or decrees can affect them.*

*As examples of quality of these records I may cite a few that attracted my attention as I hurriedly ran over the titles. There was an apparently original letter from Sir Henry Bennett dated July 20, 1660, announcing the cessation of hostilities between Spain and England. The declaration of war against France in 1673 is announced in two letters of the Queen Regent and six printed inclosures. In 1684 are found two pamphlets of 4 and 8 pages, signed in writing by five or six ministers or agents, entitled "Tratado de Tregua entre esta Corona y la de Francia, ajustada en Ratisbona en quienze de Agosto, en Madrid, año 1684. (Ford, 1905)*

Spain's involvement in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and during the American Revolution against British rule (1765–1783) figured significantly in those royal orders. Ford also noticed it and its importance to his country's history.

The years of war with England and those of the American Revolution contain matter of immediate relation with our own history. In late years the interest is not so great, due perhaps to the absence of picturesque features that surround the documents issued before the nineteenth century. But some compensation is made by the greater attention given to local affairs. The success of France and England in clipping the imperial profits of the Spanish colonies altered the tone as well as the subject matter of these decrees (Ford, 1905).

#### *Local Government Reports*

The *alcaldes mayores* (provincial governors), *gobernadorcillos* (town executives), and *cabezas de barangays* (village chiefs) had to regularly submit to the Spanish colonial government in Manila reports concerning the affairs, tax collections, and other activities of their respective territories. These reports were filed in the archives and collectively called *memorias* (reports) (SDS 13790: *Memorias de Mindanao 1872*), *erecciones de pueblos* (creations of towns) (SDS 13920: *Erección de Pueblos Antigue 1850-1856*), and *varias provincias* (provinces) (SDS 4302 B538: *Varias Provincias Laguna*). Also originated from those places documents which had been called *terrenos* (lands). The *terrenos* also contained maps of land boundaries, town plans, and grants, ownership of, and other matters concerning lands (SDS 895: *Terrenos de Manila*). The

colonial government based on those reports its decisions regarding territorial boundaries and public works. The decisions produced such other records as *gastos e ingresos públicos* (public income and expenses) and *obras públicas* (public works) (SDS 16999: *Obras Públicas*). The local executives were then elected, and records of their selection were called *elecciones* (elections), *alcaldes mayores*, and *elección de gobernadorcillos*.

#### *Civil Records*

*Registro civiles* (civil registration) since the start of Spanish rule was deputized to the local parishes of the Roman Catholic Church. It was the parish priest who supervised the recording of those information. This changed in 1889, when the colonial government established the *Oficina Central de Estadística* (Central Statistics Office) to take charge of the statistical records of the native population and foreign residents. Hence, there emerged in the archives records called *nacimientos* (births), *bautismos* (baptisms), *matrimonios* (marriages), *defunciones* (deaths), *cementerios* (cemeteries), *vecindarios* and *estadísticas* (census and statistics), *padrones de chinos* (Chinese census), and *radicaciones de Extranjeros, Españoles, y Chinos* (settlements of foreigners, Spaniards, and Chinese).

The *nacimientos* contained the child's name, age at the time of baptism, and place of birth, and the names of his parents, godparents (who served as witnesses), and the parish priest who officiated the baptism (SDS 23705: *Nacimientos*). Recorded in the *matrimonios* were the name, age, residence, and date and place of birth of each of the contracting parties (bride and groom), the occupation of the groom; the names, residences, and occupations of their parents; and the name and designation of the official who presided over the wedding ceremony. The *defunciones* stated the name, age, date and place, occupation, and cause of death of the deceased; the name of the person who reported his death; and the name of his parents, spouse, and children. There were places which did not include in these documents such details as the occupation of the groom or the spouse and parents of the dead person (SDS 15788: *Difuntos*).

#### *Court Records*

Since crimes and agreements or arguments between individuals did happen anywhere, the archives kept records marked *asuntos civiles* (civil cases), *asuntos criminales* (criminal cases), *denuncias por abusos* (complaints of abuses), *linderos* (boundary disputes), *protocolos* (notarial contracts), *bienes de difuntos*

(properties of the deceased), and *declaración de herederos* (declaration of heirs). Related to these were files called *Cortes* (courts), *Juzgado y Fiscal* (judges and fiscals), *Jueces de la Corte de Primera Instancia* (Judges of the Court First Instance), *Jueces de Paz* (Justices of Peace), and *tribunales* (tribunals).

Rebellions were common during the Spanish colonial period, and these made it into such records as *documentos de insurgentes* (insurgency documents) and *sedeciones y rebeliones* (seditions and rebellions) (*SDS 10547: Sediciones y Rebeliones, 1795-1897*). Those uprisings eventually led to the national independence movement in late 1890s, some of whose events were gathered in bundles called *Revolución de Filipinas* (Philippine Revolution). Moro raids in the Visayas, which could have been retaliatory offensives against Spanish intrusions into Moro territories in Mindanao, were recorded as *piratas* (pirates) (*SDS 16148: Piratas*). The maintenance of community peace and order belonged to files about the *guardias civiles* (civil guards), *cuarteles* (barracks), and *presidios* and *cárceles* (prisons) (*SDS 5610: Edificios del Estado*).

#### *Internal Revenues*

Records of *rentas públicas* (public taxes) that the colonial government needed to help sustain itself and fund its projects came from revenue-generating agencies whose files were called *Intendencia General de Hacienda Pública* (General Management of Public Finance), *Tesorería General* (General Treasury), and *Administración Central de Impuestos* (Central Administration of Taxation). Records of agricultural production, commerce, and investments could be found in files known as *contribución industrial* (business activities) (*SDS 15259: Contribución Industrial Cebu, 1895-1897*).

The archives kept documents of the *aduanas* (customs) in Manila, Cebu, and Iloilo, places with ports where ocean-going ships docked and left to carry goods to and from Spain, Mexico, China, and other countries (*SDS 6255: Aduana de Manila 1841*). There were also files of the *ayuntamiento* (City Hall) of Manila, Cebu, Iloilo, and Vigan, which were centers of local governance and the collection of various forms of taxes (*SDS 16008: Puentes; SDS 16795: Obras Públicas*).

#### *Public Works Records*

The archives had records of the construction of *puentes* (bridges), *caminos* (roads) (*SDS 16999: Obras Públicas; SDS 16809: Obras Públicas*), and *puertos*

(ports) (*SDS 16809: Obras Públicas; SDS 17102: Obras Públicas*); maps, plans, and photographs of the construction and operation of *ferrocarril* (railroads) (*The National Archives of the Philippines Modernization Project 1999-2000, 2000*); and records of *carruajes, vagones, y caballos* (carriages, wagons, and horses), as well as *tranvías* (trams), *pasajes* (fares), *pasaportes* (passports), *botes y boyas* (boats and buoys), and *galeones* (galleons) (“List of Collections”). There were also plans and sketches for the construction of public areas and edifices like *plazas* (town squares) (*SDS 16809: Obras Públicas*), *iglesias* (churches) (*SDS 1067: Patronatos; SDS 2024: Patronatos; SDS 2087: Patronatos*), *casas parroquiales* (parochial houses) (*SDS 2087: Patronatos*), *casas tribunales* (court houses) (*SDS 5661: Edificios del Estado 1882-1898*), *escuelas* (schools) (*SDS 12763: Escuelas*), barracks (*SDS 17544: Intendencia General de Hacienda Pública*), prisons (*SDS 5610: Edificios del Estado*), *torreones* (port towers) (*SDS 17102: Obras Públicas*), and *faros* (light houses) (*SDS 5356: Servicio de Faros; SDS 5510: Servicio de Farros*).

Records of *comunicaciones* (communications) between the provinces and towns of the archipelago and between the Philippine Islands and Spain and other countries were exchanged through channels which were filed in the archives as *cartas* (letters) (“List of Collections,”), *correos* (postal mails) (*SDS 9641: Correos*), *telégrafos* (telegrams), and *teléfonos* (telephones).

#### *School Records*

The archives also had records of higher learning institutions that were founded in the Philippine Islands, such as those of the *Universidad de Santo Tomas*, *Ateneo Municipal de Manila*, *Colegio de San Juan de Letran*, *Colegio de Sta. Isabel*, *Colegio de Sta. Potenciana*, *Colegio de Abogados* (College of Lawyers), *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* (Academy of Drawing and Painting), and *Escuela de Botánica y Agricultura de Manila* (School of Botany and Agriculture of Manila). There were also records of the *escuelas* that the colonial government built in several towns in compliance with the Educational Decree of 1863 (*SDS 12763: Escuelas*).

Arts and sciences were fostered during Spanish rule, as shown by archival files called *Museo y Biblioteca de Filipinas* (Museum and Library of the Philippines), *Observatorio Meteorológico* (Meteorological Observatory), *servicio agronómico* (agronomic service), *servicio de agricultura* (agriculture service), and *patentes de invención* (patents of inventions).

Entertainment was also lively, for there were records of *festejos y celebraciones* (festivities and celebrations), *exposiciones y ferias* (exhibitions and fairs), *carreras de caballos* (horse races), *galleras* (cockpits), and *teatros – música* (theaters – music).

#### *Health Records*

That it was a concern for the colonial government to protect the physical and mental well-being of the population, and to keep them safe from diseases, was evident in such files as *hospicios* (hospitals), *Hospicio de San Jose* and *Hospicio de San Lazaro* in Manila, and *Hospicio de Lazarinos*, a hospital for lepers in Cebu; *hospital militar* (military hospitals); *dementes* (insane); *veterinarios* (veterinarians); *boticas y farmacias* (drugstores and pharmacies); *vacuna* (vaccines); *Laboratorio Médico-Legal de Manila* (Medico-Legal Laboratory of Manila); *Laboratorio Municipal* (Medical Laboratory); and *sanidad de cementerios* (cleanliness of cemeteries). There were also records of epidemics in the Philippine Islands like the files labeled *cólera* (cholera), which chronicled the disease that ravaged Luzon in the 19th century (*SDS 5699: Benificencia y Sanidad*).

#### **Destruction of the Archives**

In 1756, war broke out in Europe. At first, it was Great Britain, Prussia, and Hanover which were allied against France, Austria, Sweden, Russia, and Saxony. Later, Spain saw itself getting entangled in the conflict, which would be called the Seven Years' War. Since the Philippine Islands was a Spanish colony at the time, it became involved in the war. Britain organized forces that would attack the Philippine Islands in India, a British colony. The expeditionary forces entered Manila Bay on 22 September 1762, and it became easy for them to capture Manila two weeks later (Rojo, 1762–1764/1907).

The British and Indian soldiers began looting the city. In search of treasures and other war prizes, they ransacked the churches, offices, residences, and other structures. They even defaced the tomb of Miguel Lopez de Legaspi at the basement of San Agustin Church. They also attacked and looted houses in Tondo and other suburbs (Rojo, 1762–1764/1907).

The British and Indian soldiers did not spare even the benign public and religious records kept at government offices and churches. They took them away as war souvenirs (Ford, 1905). Most of those records were royal decrees.

On 3 November 1763, Great Britain, France, and England signed an armistice to cease their hostilities. Three months later, they signed the Treaty of Paris to officially conclude the war. The news of the war's end reached the Philippine Islands only in May 1764. On the last day of that month, the British turned over to the Spaniards the rule of Manila and began leaving the Islands (Anda, 1764/1979).

#### *Restoration of the Archives*

When the British expeditionary forces had left, the Spanish government needed to restore order in the capital. Since the archives were among those damaged or lost, the government must have tried to accumulate records once more. The records kept piling up again at various government buildings in Intramuros. This could be one reason that many of the records in the Archives called *erecciones* and *memorias* were made after 1765. The archives employees attempted to systematize these records. They had them gathered, stitched, sewn, bound in volumes, and categorized under different series (Ford, 1905). Again in his paper in 1904, Ford reported the steps that the Spanish colonial government had taken to reorganize the archives.

The entire collection must at some time have been bound in volumes, and occasionally changed in arrangement, for each document of the earlier centuries bears two and even more page numbers, showing that the papers must have been arranged in different series at different times, and probably they have been bound or stitched in such series three or four times. As these volumes were subject to be withdrawn by different bureaus or departments as occasion required, and sometimes retained for a long period or not replaced in their proper position, as there was little or no examination of the contents of the volumes before and after such use, the wonder is that so much has been saved from loss. In 1880 an attempt was made to bring the collection together, and at some late period a chronological arrangement was introduced. This necessitated the breaking up of the volumes ... (Ford, 1905).

The Archives employees attained a certain degree of competence in having the records classified and arranged, as shown by the following volumes that Ford's 1904 paper observed:

*Varias Cédulas (three volumes).  
Volume I (containing records made in  
1588-1833), Volume II (1756-1790),  
Volume III (1722-1829).*

*Reales Órdenes originales* (eight volumes). Volume I (1625-1686), Volume II (1687-1720), Volume III (1722-1747), Volume IV (1748-1765), Volume V (1766-1772), Volume VI (1773-1781), Volume VII (1782-1790), and Volume VIII (1791-92).

*Reales Cédulas y Órdenes* (six volumes). The first volume begun with Volume IV (1650-1666), and the last volume was Volume IX (1735-1747).

*Reales Órdenes* (three volumes). Volume X (1748-1764). Volume XI (1763-1778). The third volume had no number.

*Reales Órdenes* (69 volumes). The first volume began with Volume IV (1784-1785) and ended with the volume containing papers of 1856. Some royal orders could be found in these volumes, but the majority of these papers were government dispatches from Spain (Ford, 1905).

The Archives employees also arranged and bound in 187 volumes documents that had been sent by provincial governments. Some of them still had those written in the sixteenth century, while the last volume was made in 1867. These records accommodated concerns and questions regarding the management of the towns and provinces (Ford, 1905).

### The Archives by the 1890s

At the end of Spanish rule in 1898, most of the Spanish archives were gathered at the *Intendencia General* building in Intramuros. A government report in 1901 said that the archives contained the history of three centuries of Spanish rule and were therefore “a source of information necessary in the formation and administration of laws relating to the Filipino people” (“Annual Report of the United States Philippine Commission to the Secretary of War for the Period from December 1, 1900, to October 15, 1901, Part 1”, 1901).

The report also revealed that a considerable part of the archives was made up of royal orders that were transmitted from Spain for more than three centuries. There were also records on general administration of the archipelago; the municipalities; personal records

of officials; civil and religious corporations; colleges, hospitals, pious foundations; banks and mercantile corporations; printing offices; colonies; penal institutions; consulates; Chinese immigration; patents and trademarks; public charity and health; public instruction; post and telegraph; market-license contracts; cock pits; weights and measures; ferries; opium; construction and repair of State, provincial, and municipal buildings; bridges, roads, railroads, tramways, and wagons; industrial, urban, *cedula* (identification cards), and Chinese head taxes; customs duties; revenues from stamped paper; revenues from wine and tobacco when these articles were monopolized by the State; sale of State lands; and security fund (“Annual Report of the United States Philippine Commission to the Secretary of War for the Period from December 1, 1900, to October 15, 1901, Part 1”, 1901).

There were also 12,873 records regarding the sale of land, which were continuously consulted because of numerous complaints lodged by private parties (*ibid.*). There were receipts of deposits made by contractors on account of bonds and bids on contracts that had reached the sum of \$97,433.75. The contractors had filed claims with the Spanish Government, but the latter failed to honor them (“Annual Report of the United States Philippine Commission to the Secretary of War for the Period from December 1, 1900, to October 15, 1901, Part 1”, 1901).

Records showed that public works suffered from the Spanish-American War (1898), since many planned projects were not carried out or had been abandoned. While the books of the Spanish Treasury revealed that state funds were diverted to honor mortgage obligations accrued from the last loan that the Spanish government had acquired to finance the war (“Annual Report of the United States Philippine Commission to the Secretary of War for the Period from December 1, 1900, to October 15, 1901, Part 1”, 1901).

According to a survey made in 1973 by Dr. Rosario Parra y Calla, directress of Archivo General de Indias of Seville, Spain, among the earliest records to be classified were those on mines and settlements of lands done by the *Inspección General de Montes* (General Inspection of Mountains) and by the *Obras del Puerto* (Bureau of Port Works). Of the port works made by the Spaniards, 17 still existed and were serviceable to navigation, eight were still being constructed at the closing of their rule, six had been

approved but their construction was never realized, nine were still being planned, and one was not given any attention (Parra y Calla, 1976).

### A Spanish Legacy

During Spanish rule of the Philippines, archival science was not yet existing; thus, the state archives were left to decay. Although such was the situation of the state archives, the Spaniards nonetheless created and accumulated records that captured a nation's history for more than three centuries. The vivid accounts and colorful illustrations in those records ensured the coming generations of how things came about during those long years of foreign rule. Filipinos also took part in the creation of those records by providing the Spanish authorities the necessary details. They proved what Tasio the Philosopher, a sagacious character of Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tangere*, said that "not all slept during the night of their ancestors." However, it was the Spaniards who gathered and kept them in the state archives. The importance of these records may warrant anyone to make an assessment for himself that they are comparable to the Roman Catholic religion as one of Spain's living and enduring legacies to the Filipino people.

The Spanish records have now become the most prized possessions and the core of the National Archives of the Philippines. It would be impossible to envisage the country's national archives without them. Through these records, researchers, historians, writers, and the public in general are able to discern the foundations of provinces and towns (local history); how places were governed, populated, or depopulated; the institution of civil records to formalize the identity of individuals, families, and clans; the entry of foreigners into the archipelago; the construction of roads, bridges, railways, public buildings, and public squares; the collection, use, or misuse of tributes and other taxes; the development of agriculture and industries; the establishment of schools; various forms of entertainment; armed conflicts; crimes and offenders against lives, properties, public safety, and public decency; the administration of justice; and the advances gained in education, transportation, communication, commerce, arts, literature, health and sanitation, and other aspects of civilization during the Spanish colonial period. If these records are destroyed, lost, or left to decay, more than three centuries of the nation's history will be demolished from the Filipino people's memory.

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