



## State and Local Government Archives

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THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTION and care of state and local government archives has long been recognized by historians, who have realized their value for research. But it was not until 1938 that the Society of American Archivists was formed, the first American professional organization whose prime purpose was stated to be to give the subject of preservation and care of public archives, on federal, state and local levels, the attention they deserve. Today even the small public library is aware of the importance of local archives in preserving and writing the history of the community, and local history sections or local history rooms are prominent features of local libraries.

In 1955 the Committee on State Archives of the Society of American Archivists issued a *Comparative Study of State and U.S. Territorial Laws Governing Archives*, which summarized the situation with regard to depositories of governmental archives. According to that publication, over half of the depositories of state records are state libraries or libraries of state historical societies. It might be supposed that the newer states would have separate depositories, but such seems not to be the case. Idaho, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, North and South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin are among those in which the state historical society is the depository; in Illinois, Indiana, New York, Oklahoma, and Oregon among others it is the state library. Maryland and Delaware, two of the original thirteen states, have separate archival establishments. Practically all of these library depositories have local records as well as state; and, also, private papers or manuscripts collections. In most cases the governmental archives are received on a voluntary basis, although some states have public records laws—generally permissive rather than compulsory in their provisions.

This quasiarchival nature of the library poses a number of problems for the librarian-archivist which do not confront him in his administra-

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tion of the private or unofficial manuscript holdings of the library. Two administrative problems seem foremost: one, how should or may collections of government archives be assembled by the library; the other, how may they serve effectively not only historical scholarship, the primary purpose of collections of personal or unofficial manuscripts, but also the business of government. Their processing also has unique features.

It has already been noted that in most instances where a library has become the depository of state archives transferred from the department of issue such transfer is governed by some sort of legislation. But the legislation of necessity varies as the history and development of the political units have varied. The library which is a depository for governmental archives is concerned not only with those types of records which have research value, but to a large extent with those that have been designated for preservation and transfer because of their administrative or legal value.

If the librarian-archivist is so fortunate as to be a member of the board or commission charged with the responsibility of records disposition, he can bring to the discussion his knowledge in the fields of history, political science, and the social sciences, and of research projects in progress, all of which will aid greatly in reaching a sound decision in the matter. This is important; for once the library has received the records, it is held accountable for them and has no authority to liquidate them, yet the sheer bulk of official records requires that they be reduced in quantity as much as possible. Also the librarian's knowledge of records already in his keeping enables him to recognize records under consideration as filling gaps in certain series or as furnishing information long sought by scholars. No doubt all who are charged with governmental archives have experienced the thrill of coming upon an elusive survey book, a missing volume in a series of minute books of a board or commission, or in the case of local archives, a record book showing school district boundaries.

The librarian needs to be familiar with the history of the state government in all its phases in order to be able to exercise sound judgment in building the archival collection. For, as Philip Brooks has so well said, governmental archives consist of "series of records continuously maintained in the offices of origin or transferred to archival agencies without disarrangement so that they will represent accurately the functions of their offices."

In states where the decision to transfer records is voluntary with the departments of issue the librarian must exercise the utmost tact

and consideration in broaching the subject. He feels a responsibility for the preservation of records of value and therefore for keeping the matter of transfer before the departments. On the other hand, some consideration must be given to the personnel who throughout many years have had charge of the records and have willingly—and in the main efficiently—serviced them both for official business and for research. Staff, space, and equipment problems have been theirs, as they are and will be the library's. But the library, having embarked on a project of building up a governmental archives collection on a state or local level, or a combination of the two, has the problem of keeping alert to the possibility of important accessions, of acquainting department personnel with the willingness of the library to accept them, and of preserving good relations so that the librarian will be apprised whenever disposition of records is being considered.

Margaret Norton, state archivist of Illinois, has defined current and noncurrent records, and has added a third category, semicurrent records. Current records she describes as "those which because of their frequent use in the department of origin must of necessity be kept under its immediate jurisdiction"; semicurrent, "those to which reference by the department of origin is only occasional but over which that department desires to keep immediate jurisdiction"; non-current, "those which generally, because of age, tend to be of relatively greater historical than legal interest."<sup>1</sup>

The library depository of archives might therefore be thought to be very little concerned with the administrative and legal aspects of the records transferred. In actual practice, however, this is far from the case. Time and again records which may have been classed as noncurrent at the time of transfer have, in the course of events, assumed a current character and have figured in cases of paramount importance in current governmental affairs. In fact, one of the most challenging phases of reference work in archives is that of producing old records pertinent to present-day affairs with which the state is vitally concerned. The St. Lawrence Seaway project, for example, in which both Canada and New York State are involved, has brought forth a claim by the St. Regis Indians that they own Barnhart's Island in the St. Lawrence, maintaining that the state of New York never paid them the \$5,960 they were to receive in compliance with a law of 1856. In one of a series of ledgers transferred to the New York State Library by the Department of Audit and Control, covering that year, is a record of the payment of that obligation. New York State census records, the latest of these for 1925, acquired major

administrative value when the national social security program was inaugurated. Land records transferred to the New York State Library from the Department of State dating back to the early seventeenth century continue to play an important role in state affairs. The colonial patents are still scanned by personnel of the state Departments of Law, Public Works, and Conservation in the settlement of title questions in such current projects as the New York State Thruway and other state highways, and state parks. The federal government, too, has sought such records in connection with its plan to enlarge the West Point Military Reservation. Similar examples can be drawn from other states. The particular point to be stressed is that the library as a depository of government archives performs an important function in connection with the business of government as well as historical scholarship.

The Archivist of the United States in his *Third Annual Report* wrote that "In determining . . . what records should be preserved, there is no conflict between the interests of government and the interests of private investigators."<sup>2</sup> Many records of little or no apparent historical value must be preserved because of their potential administrative value. Many obviously have both values. Often the former take on considerable interest to the historical scholar. This transition from administrative to historical importance has been noted in the past as the scope of historical research has broadened and social and economic history has achieved an importance equal if not surpassing that of military and political history. One instance can be cited where the papers of a governor were cleared of all that pertained to his land holdings and dealings as being of no importance to the scholar, who, it was thought at the time, would be concerned only with his public life.

Hilary Jenkinson, the eminent English authority on archival work, has said: "Fundamental is the organic unity of the documents, expressing the life of the organization which created them. Archives accumulate naturally in offices for the practical purposes of administration"<sup>3</sup>—they are not collected artificially because it is thought that they will be of use or interest to students. Although they are of immense value for research, nevertheless Jenkinson's description should be kept in mind in processing governmental archives, and *respect des fonds* must be a guiding principle—for two reasons: (1) they may be needed for "practical purposes of administration," and (2) the organization maintained as the records were being made—the filing system employed, if one may use the term—may prove to

### *State and Local Government Archives*

be sound and in the main the best for purposes of research as well. Cooperation with the department in the transfer of archives is essential if *respect des fonds* is to be possible. Too often records are taken from filing equipment, packed promiscuously in cartons or baskets, and unloaded unceremoniously in even worse disarray. Rearrangement is a time-consuming task, with much chance for error. The ideal situation is one in which the librarian-archivist confers with the department, and arrangement is made whereby the serial identification is maintained.

The volume of records in any one transfer makes it imperative to employ methods of processing whereby they may in a short space of time be made available for consultation. Descriptive lists, accompanied by histories of departments, bureaus, investigating commissions, etc., can be prepared only after a detailed and scholarly examination, which will as a rule have to be spread over a considerable period of time. Jenkinson has pointed out that "any Archive is potentially related closely to others both inside and outside the group in which it is preserved" and that "its significance depends on these relations."<sup>4</sup> The librarian-archivist must familiarize himself with the contents of the record groups so that he can set forth these relationships in the comprehensive descriptive guides and other reference tools. This is where the special archival knowledge of the librarian comes into service, so that he may bring organic unity into the great masses of records of the various departments of government. A useful single-sheet form of inventory, filed by department, is the following adapted from one employed by the Historical Records Survey in New York State. It provides a quick means of determining whether the various series of department records which have been transferred are of a nature or period to offer possibilities of material pertinent to a research or administrative problem:

NEW YORK STATE LIBRARY  
STATE ARCHIVES INVENTORY

CLASS

LOCATION

1. Department of origin.....
2. Series (with variations of title) .....  
.....  
.....
3. Dates .....
4. Number and size of volumes, packages, boxes.....  
.....
5. Subtitles, with dates .....
6. Obvious gaps (by number, group, date, etc.).....  
.....  
.....
7. Contents: types of records; summary of forms; arrangement;  
    remarks .....
8. Indexing .....
9. Recording (handwritten, typescript, photostats, microfilm, etc.)
10. Condition .....
11. Transfer data .....
12. Processing .....

### *State and Local Government Archives*

Some archivists have expressed the opinion that the only step in processing besides the descriptive inventory is indexing, which, they admit, is unpractical under present budgetary conditions. They maintain that such library techniques as cataloging and shelving are superfluous, even detrimental, and that library training is an actual handicap to the archivist. They claim that the method of preparing governmental records for use is so different from processing books that the librarian must unlearn all he has been taught. This seems an unsound judgment. Book classification is by subject, whereas archives are classified by agency of origin. However, there seems no valid reason for omitting official archives from a manuscripts catalog; and the more knowledge the librarian-archivist has of library techniques in cataloging books and printed government documents—choice of corporate entries, collations, notes, subject headings, and other details—the more expeditiously and efficiently will a most useful tool for locating available material on a subject be prepared, namely, a good catalog.

It is a safe assumption that no archivist who, it is agreed, is one who combines scholarship with records administration, would advocate not cataloging non-official manuscripts. Surely the catalog should indicate, for example, that material on the Erie Canal is contained in the library's collection of papers of Elkanah Watson. Should it not indicate, also, that the minutes of the Canal Commissioners during the period of its construction are among state archives now deposited in the library? A subject card for the Erie Canal would quickly yield that information. The catalog entries for archives will not take the place of the detailed descriptive list, but they are a convenient additional key to the location of source material in the library's holdings, and without them the catalog would be misleading. A similar case can be made for the shelving entries. In libraries which have both official and non-official manuscript material, the cards for both types should be filed in one dictionary catalog. One chief difference in the processing is that governmental archives received by transfer are not accessioned as are private manuscripts or archives acquired by purchase or gift. Theoretically the department of issue retains title to the records transferred. Libraries which maintain separate archives departments, such as the Illinois State Library and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, do not have the problem of integrating official archives and personal or private manuscript material in a single series of processing records.

Since the library does not have title to archives transferred to it,

they may be subject to recall—unless some restriction is imposed at the time of transfer. Sometimes only a single item or volume may be requested, and may be returned shortly. As a rule, departments are happy in knowing their records are safely housed and efficiently administered, and ask to take particular documents only if a current administrative problem can best be handled that way. In some instances records have been microfilmed before being transferred; but occasions have been noted when the microfilm is used only as an index, the original records being called for from time to time. Close cooperation between the depository library and government departments is essential in any smooth-working archival program. Confidence in the library's handling of the program and an understanding of department needs and problems are prime requisites—whether it be a state library, a municipal library such as the large Municipal Reference Library in New York City, a county archival library such as that for Montgomery County, New York, or a small village library with only a few local records in its collection.

Someone has said: "Posterity is entitled to a full written report of the past." The establishment of safe depositories for private manuscripts and public documents in the custody of intelligent guardians is important. State and local governmental archives in libraries have historical value in addition to administrative value. They deserve the same professional and scholarly treatment as that accorded important family papers or individual holographic documents. Bulk and less attractive outward appearance, and pressures of other work, are apt to give them low priority; but in such cases the depository is apt to become, as one writer has said, "a warehouse for used paper." Irving P. Schiller continues: "Indeed, it may well be asked what is the point of seeking and preserving policy records, documents that not only have an obvious legal or administrative use, but that have a potential historical significance."<sup>5</sup> This observation, although directed to strictly archival depositories, applies equally to the libraries under discussion here. Rapport with departments of government which results in voluntary transfer of records can be maintained only if it is known that such records are efficiently administered to serve the business of government as the need arises, as well as historical research. C. V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos, in their *Introduction of the Study of History*,<sup>6</sup> state the case for the historian: "The historian works with documents. Documents are the traces which have been left by the thoughts and actions of men of former times. . . . For want of documents the history of immense periods in the past of humanity is



## *State and Local Government Archives*

destined to remain for ever unknown. For there is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history." And, one may add, one of the most important types of documents is government archives.

### *References*

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3. Cappon, L. J.: Historical Manuscripts as Archives: Some Definitions and Their Application. *American Archivist*, 19:102-103, April 1956.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Schiller, I. P.: The Archival Profession in Eclipse. *American Archivist*, 11: 233, July 1948.
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