

## THE ADMINISTRATION OF STATE ARCHIVES<sup>1</sup>

THERE is nothing new or surprising about the historians' concern for the preservation of the noncurrent records of government. As early as 1910 the American Historical Association adopted a resolution urging Congress to provide a centralized depository for federal records, and since that time historians have whole-heartedly supported the movement which resulted in 1934 in the passage of an act to establish the National Archives. Nearly forty years ago the Public Archives Commission set up by that same association began their earnest and continuing efforts to learn the facts about the archives of individual states and to promote the enactment of state laws providing for more efficient archival administration. Within ten years these efforts bore fruit in the appointment of custodians of public records in some twenty states, and in the passage of a considerable body of regulatory legislation. The revival of active interest in archives during the past three or four years, which has brought about the organization of works projects approved by the states and by the federal government, likewise may be attributed mainly to the initiative and persistence of historians and historical societies.

Despite this traditional zeal for the preservation of archives, I believe it is not inappropriate for me to recall the subject to your attention, since there are still a number of states which have not set up central depositories, and those of the Pacific Coast and the Northwest have yet to make serious studies of the problems involved. Although many records of the state of Oregon were destroyed in the capitol fire of 1935 the state librarian reports that the new building has no facilities for the administration of archives other than the usual departmental vaults. California leaves the custody of certain records to the secretary of state but there is no archivist intrusted with the responsibility of preserving state records not found in that office. Idaho, Montana, and Nevada have given little or no thought to the

<sup>1</sup> This article, which is reprinted with minor variations from the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, January, 1938, is the substance of a paper read at the thirty-third annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at the University of Washington, Seattle, December 30, 1937, at the joint session on Archives with the Federal Historical Records Survey and members of the Society of American Archivists. The author wishes to express his appreciation of the generous co-operation by state archivists and custodians in the assembling of data relating to archival practices. Their response to the questionnaire sent to them was most gratifying. Without their assistance this summary analysis could not have been written.

appointment of state archivists. Wyoming and Utah have made small progress in consolidating their noncurrent records. In Washington such records are being assembled in the new quarters assigned to the archivist, but much remains to be done before the archives may be said to have been put on the same plane of efficiency as the state library or the offices from which the papers came. Actually we of the western states have only just begun to face the task of preserving and administering our public records. Yet I know of no good reason why the Pacific Coast should not be represented in the growing group of states which recognize that task as one of the essential functions of government.

It is not, however, the primary purpose of this paper to exhort and persuade listeners already won to the cause. Rather I should like to assume an agreement upon the desirability of our objectives, in order that I may spend the remainder of my time pointing out some of the practical questions that come up once a decision has been reached to appoint an archivist and to place under his care the noncurrent records of state officials. I shall not present general solutions for these difficulties since in most instances unanimity of opinion has not yet been reached. Nevertheless, a summary of the experience of individual states should clarify our problems and suggest some possible solutions at least.

The first group of these practical questions to which answers must be found has to do with the administrative set-up; that is, with the status of the archivist, the budget within which he must operate, and the qualifications and training of his personnel. Closely associated are those which relate to the housing and equipping of his archives staff.

In dealing with the general supervision of archives the states have served as experimental laboratories and their experience has been varied. The general trend has been to view the permanent preservation of records as primarily a cultural and educational responsibility to be turned over either to the historians or to the librarians. In some cases where publicly supported state historical societies were already in existence, as in Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Utah, they were made official depositories. In certain other states where there were no such societies or where, because they were not located at the state capitol, or for other reasons they were not deemed suitable, state commissions or departments were created which usually did not have the popular support of paying members, but which in their functions resembled closely the historical

societies of the upper Middle West. Thus Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and West Virginia have their Departments of Archives and History; North Carolina and South Carolina have their Historical Commissions, and Iowa has its Historical, Memorial and Art Department. Georgia maintains a Department of Archives and History under the general supervision of the secretary of state. All of these treat the care of archives as only part of their program of historical activities.

The list of states which make their librarians custodians of official records includes Arizona, Connecticut, Indiana, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia. Only in a very few cases, notably Maryland and Delaware, have archives establishments been set up as independent administrative agencies. Vermont this year created a Public Records Commission, but has not as yet provided funds for its operations. In several states, among which Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and California may be mentioned, archivists have been appointed as subordinate to the secretary of state. Such custodians are not to be considered state archivists in the broad sense of the term since they have charge only of records in the one office. In these states no general consolidation of records has been achieved. Maine and New Hampshire, Missouri, and the northern Rocky Mountain states likewise leave the custody of noncurrent files to departmental officials. The state of Washington has suggested an interesting variation by providing for consolidation while at the same time intrusting supervision to the director of the Department of Finance, Budget, and Business.

There is little likelihood that any uniform type of archives establishment will emerge from this variety of state practices, for a long time at least; nor is such uniformity essential to the efficient discharge of the task in hand. On the contrary, it is highly probable that future advances will be made by a process of building on foundations already laid, using historical societies, libraries, or commissions as seems most advantageous. Two principles are clear, however, for the guidance of future endeavor. Whether cared for by an independent agency or by a division of some larger administrative unit, the preservation of state archives should be viewed as a distinct function of government which should be intrusted to qualified experts. Standing midway between the present and the past, the archivist should consider himself bound to serve efficiently the needs both of administrative officials and of historians, yet his office should not be domi-

nated by the special interests of either. If organized under a state historical society, the archives should be a co-ordinate branch with the library, the museum, and the publications office. They might perhaps be merged with the manuscript division. If closely associated with the library, the archivist should have a voice on the library board. Arizona suggests one solution in the enactment of a recent state law creating a Department of Library and Archives.

The second guiding principle is that state archives should be kept nonpolitical, that general supervision should be nonpartisan, and the appointments and tenure should be determined on the basis of merit. Efforts have been made to achieve this goal in several states by the creation of supervisory commissions whose members serve without compensation. In Maryland and South Carolina these commissions include the presidents, or heads of history departments, of state educational institutions, and representatives of state historical societies. In Maryland the governmental viewpoint is represented by the governor, controller, and chief justice of the court of appeals. Indiana follows the same policy, and Vermont makes the secretary of state *ex officio* a member of her commission. In Delaware the desire to avoid politics has resulted in the exclusion of governmental officials from membership. The Nebraska arrangement balances *ex officio* members with others who are elected.

The problem of the qualifications and training of personnel is not to be solved simply by a provision for nonpolitical supervision. Sometimes the feeling that noncurrent records are of no further present usefulness has resulted in a toleration of neglect and inefficiency. Equally important is the fact that the methods of handling archives have been developed rapidly in recent years while training courses have not yet been instituted. State historical societies and commissions have been the proving ground from which several of the members of the staff of the National Archives were recruited. Now the process is reversed and the National Archives is beginning to feed trained men back into state positions. The training has been gained by apprenticeship and experience in both cases. It might be added that experience with surveys of historical records set up as works projects has in some instances led to the securing of archives positions either in a federal or state organization. To date, however, no formal training courses in this country have furnished a supply of persons fitted to fill the position of state archivist. There is now the prospect that this obstacle to the advance of archival economy may be removed by

the inauguration of courses at Columbia University and the University of Illinois. At Columbia, the department of history is taking the initiative in working out a co-operative scheme between the university and the National Archives. At Illinois, the course will be divided between the university and the state archives at Springfield.

A significant trend is to be observed in the increasing emphasis that is being placed upon a knowledge of political science and governmental organization in the training of archivists. At Columbia, the plan of work will include courses offered by the faculty of political science, and it is expected that some of the students will take their doctor's degree in public law rather than in history. Members of the staff of the National Archives, some of them selected originally on the basis of specialization in history, are being urged to take further study in political economy. The profession is becoming more technical and future candidates for positions will probably find a study of government equally as valuable to them as their acquaintance with history. At all events we may anticipate that more trained men will be available, and that states will demand and secure qualified persons.

The raising of standards in archival administration will be limited by the willingness of state legislatures to make appropriations for the establishment and maintenance of archives divisions, since improvement necessarily involves expenditures. The salary scale for archivists must be brought up reasonably near parity with corresponding supervisory positions in other departments and in libraries. Subordinate assistants should be employed in sufficient numbers to carry on the work of transferring records, classifying and cataloguing them, compiling guides, and furnishing prompt reference service to officials and other investigators. Housing and equipment should be provided, which will entail substantial initial appropriations, though more modest amounts will suffice after operations are stabilized.

An encouragement and a challenge to greater effort is the example of Maryland, South Carolina, and Illinois in the construction of specially designed halls of records. It may be mentioned in passing that the Maryland building was voted as part of the Tercentenary Memorial program, while the South Carolina hall is a World War memorial. The recent or present construction of new state buildings will do much to improve the situation in Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, North Carolina, and Washington, and several other states are considering similar plans. Indiana records are comfortably housed in

a new state library. Yet there are many states where the archives are crowded into quarters far too small. Nebraska has a site but as yet no building. Several depositories comprise one, two, or three rooms in a capitol, a supreme court building, or a state education building. Clearly no program of systematic transfer is possible when space restrictions are prohibitive.

The installation of special equipment is likewise limited in state archives by the funds available, and few of them possess many modern improvements. Maryland and Illinois will have fumigation chambers soon; they now have air cleaners, as does also Indiana. The new presses used for the repair of documents by lamination are as yet too new or too expensive to have been installed in state archives. Gauze facing is most commonly used for repair. The ingenuity that Maryland and other states have shown in equipping their repair-rooms is proof that much may be done without incurring great expense. For the reproduction of documents, photostat equipment is usually available, and several states are purchasing Recordak or Photorecord cameras.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discover the sums applied to the administration of archives in many states, since they are hidden in general budgets from which specific items can not be ascertained. A few figures may be cited, however, to indicate what the archives-minded states are spending. The budget of the Maryland Hall of Records (which has a staff of nine) is approximately 30,000 dollars per year. The Illinois Archives Division has almost 20,000 dollars<sup>2</sup> to carry on its work; there are eight persons on the staff. The North Carolina Historical Commission receives 21,000 dollars for its whole program, a substantial part of it going to archives work, while Virginia spent 13,835 dollars in the fiscal year 1935-1936. These are the leaders, though Alabama, Mississippi, and West Virginia appropriate from twelve to fifteen thousand dollars for the support of their Departments of Archives and History. Other states carry on with lesser amounts. Delaware maintains a corps of three workers on a budget of 6,875 dollars. New Jersey spends 8,490 dollars of which the salary of the director is 3,000 dollars. Washington and Iowa make available about 6,000 dollars, while Texas, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island give only some 3,000 dollars to their respective ar-

<sup>2</sup> For the year ending June 30, 1937, the year before the archives were moved into the new Archives Building.

chivists. Several states anticipate that new quarters will make possible an expansion of their work, and larger appropriations will probably be made.

The principle underlying provisions for the transfer of records from departmental offices to general archival depositories is simple enough: only those papers shall go which are no longer needed for the conduct of current business. Yet in actual practice, efforts to frame a general definition of eligibility seldom meet with success. Several states have attempted to prescribe the minimum age of the records which may be transferred for permanent preservation. In Virginia, records originating prior to and including the year 1800 may be moved; in Pennsylvania the date is 1840. Delaware sets the age at seventy-five years. These are extreme cases. Nebraska requires that records shall have been inactive for twenty years before transfer. Georgia and Utah specify ten years, but in the latter state administrative officials are given discretion. Kansas records must have been inactive three years, while Indiana materials must be at least three years old and inactive at the end of that period. These time intervals do not insure automatic transfer but only fix the limits within which records may be considered noncurrent.

In practically all cases, decisions to deposit specific files are reached by a process of constant consultation and agreement between the archivist and the departmental custodian. The initiative ordinarily rests with the latter and legislation is permissive, the assumption being that he is the one who should know whether or not records are inactive. In New York, the wishes of the custodian, approved by the regents, are obligatory upon the archivist. The more common arrangement is one reached by mutual negotiation, and often an archivist must refuse to accept a file because of lack of space. Occasionally acceptance is determined by a desire to fill out files already transferred, or by the historical importance of the records in question. Such factors should not enter into a decision; in an ideal situation the archivist should be in a position to accept all noncurrent records, subject, however, to provisions for their destruction if they have no value. The latter point I shall mention again presently.

In a few instances state laws provide for a procedure in which the archivist rather than the custodian takes the initiative. In Nebraska, the consent of the custodian is stipulated, while in Arizona, state officers are required to turn over noncurrent files. The Texas law authorizes the archivist to demand documents from state officers and



prescribes a decision by the attorney general in cases of dispute. The Indiana Commission on Public Records determines what records are of official value, and may order the removal of those which are consulted only infrequently. Such a procedure is designed to discourage obstructionist tactics on the part of administrative officers. Transfer by persuasion, rather than by compulsion, is, however, the general rule.

The extent to which noncurrent records should be consolidated raises the further question as to the desirability of depositing in the state archives two classes of files which I have not previously mentioned. These categories comprise (1) the records of agencies or institutions managed by the state such as prisons, hospitals, and educational institutions; and (2) the records of counties and municipalities. Apparently little attention has been given to the first of these classes. North Carolina and South Carolina permit their transfer and Illinois anticipates that such files will come in, although none have yet been deposited. No special procedures should be necessary to cover this class of materials, since most of the institutions concerned are under the direction of a department head. This is not always true, however, and the problem is deserving of further study. Conceivably archivists may be empowered to regulate the preservation of these records even though they may not be transferred.

As for the transfer of county and municipal records, decisions are usually reached in specific cases after balancing the danger of possible loss or destruction against the desirability of leaving them in the place of origin. In some states, such as Delaware and North Carolina, a considerable number of local records have been deposited. The Illinois archivist encourages centralization but is meeting with local opposition; the Minnesota Historical Society, on the other hand, discourages transfer and urges the counties to improve conditions in their own courthouses. In Virginia, judges are authorized to direct the transfer to the state archives of certain classes of local records if they are not being properly kept. The archivist may apply for such a court order if he deems it advisable. The state record commissioner of Rhode Island may seize local records in cases of negligence. Massachusetts seeks to insure a plan of decentralized preservation through regulation by a state supervisor of public records, and Vermont is inaugurating a plan that is somewhat similar, although regulation will be linked more closely with the state archives and there will be greater provision for the transfer of records threatened with destruc-



tion. In Indiana, Iowa, and several other states, local officials may deposit records if they so desire. In general, preservation is the keynote of state policy.

One further complication of the problem of centralization is the question of depositing in state archives the records of local administrative offices of the federal government. The recent survey of federal records located outside the District of Columbia has brought this problem more conspicuously to our attention, and while a solution of it must rest largely upon the decision of federal authorities and the National Archives it is not unlikely that state archivists may contribute to satisfactory working arrangements by which some at least of these records will be preserved in the locality to which they most directly refer. A single illustration of this type of agreement may be cited. It is the transfer to the Oklahoma Historical Society of the local records of the Department of Interior relating to Indian tribes assigned to that region.

Scarcely second to the problem of transfer in complexity is the question of determining which records should be preserved and which, if any, should be destroyed. For some time *preservation* was the single watchword among historians and archivists. In our fear of losing something that might be significant we refused to destroy anything at all. Encouraged by numerous historical "finds" among bales of waste paper in dusty attics, our efforts to discover more must now be reconciled with the patent impossibility of preserving for future generations the staggering mass of routine records produced each year by an ever growing number of governmental agencies. The problem is one that has already begun to gray the hair of deputy examiners in the National Archives and state archivists will pray in vain to escape it. We may hope, to be sure, that the careful study given by such groups as the Committee on Reduction set up by the Society of American Archivists will yield helpful suggestions, yet we do but delude ourselves if we expect them to supply us with any easy solution. Decisions must necessarily be made for specific cases and the responsibility for making them will be a heavy one. Furthermore, archivists should seek rather than evade that responsibility, and should promote the enforcement of procedures which give them the control of destruction in place of leaving it to the discretion of departmental custodians. At present some representative of the state archives must approve the destruction of records in Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Vermont;

and Pennsylvania is working toward a similar plan. There are restrictive provisions in Massachusetts, Arizona, and Illinois. Approximately one-third of the states of the Union have taken action; it is extremely desirable that others should do so. Meanwhile consideration should be given to the possibility of reducing the volume of records by miniature film copies, and to the possible elimination of duplicate files and routine forms, the substance of which is found in condensed form elsewhere.

The classification and arrangement of materials and the preparation of reference guides are among the most important of the practical responsibilities delegated to state archivists, yet little can be said in generalization to summarize their achievements or to analyze their problems. Since an investigation such as this must necessarily be carried on at long range it is impossible to discover, for example, to what extent classifications reflect that development of governmental structure which, as Mr. Lamb has suggested, it is so essential to understand. The principle of preserving the grouping of records according to offices of origin is coming to be observed more extensively, but there are undoubtedly many instances in which the arrangement of records within those main groupings has been changed. When bundles of papers are transferred to the archives after having been rescued, perhaps in chaotic disorder, from a forgotten corner of the basement of the capitol, it may well be impossible to determine their original arrangement, and an arbitrary system of classification may be necessary. Nevertheless, convenient though a simple chronological or alphabetical arrangement may be, an archivist must first make every effort to discover the figure of the administrator's filing pattern, recognizing that otherwise he may destroy the relations that certain documents bear to others, which are highly significant.

It would be inappropriate here to enter upon a discussion of the several varieties of indexes, inventories, catalogues, and calendars by means of which investigators are enabled to exploit documentary collections. Oftentimes such guides are compiled by administrative custodians as the records accumulate and are transferred with them. Otherwise the archives staff must prepare them, and it is a time-consuming task, which is poor material for an annual report, but which, when well executed, brings a song to the lips of the research man. Almost without exception the states have initiated or completed the preparation of finding aids of some kind. Illinois has a name index of 180,000 cards and Pennsylvania has one covering

provincial and revolutionary records. Texas and West Virginia are indexing muster rolls and Civil War records. Ohio has completed a calendar of executive documents and Minnesota has published a bibliography of territorial documents. These are only a few of the many projects that are rendering state archives more useful each year for reference purposes.

In conclusion may I suggest one final question the answer to which is fundamental if an archivist's program is to be carried out successfully in any state. Who should be allowed to use his records and under what restrictions should these persons work? So far as the prescribing of regulations for workrooms is concerned, the practice of states is fairly uniform. Control is insured by requiring that documents shall be used only under the supervision of an attendant, and rules are formulated to guarantee that manuscripts shall not suffer damage by careless handling. Illinois, anticipating the extensive utilization of new archives facilities, plans the publication of a new regulatory code. Most of the states are more informal in their handling of readers; North Carolina, for instance, follows the principle of making as few rules as possible. In an age of fountain pens, ink is no longer strictly taboo although its use is still forbidden in a number of workrooms. Typewriters are permissible in many archives and but few custodians now frown upon the use of cameras. Several archivists ask that written permission be secured for the one or the other.

Archivists assume, and rightly, that only responsible persons of serious purpose should be permitted to consult the files under their jurisdiction. In some states the problem may appear not to be one of keeping the multitude away from the gates, but of persuading people to come in. This is true, however, where the archives have not yet been set up as a going concern; a state derives benefit in proportion to its investment in them. Where records are consolidated and an efficient organization established to administer them, there is little occasion to doubt the usefulness of the archives as agencies of public service. By maintaining working relations with administrative offices archivists secure the transfer of an increasing amount of borderline material and officials come to view the archives files as extensions of their own. Furthermore, the efficient administration of noncurrent files encourages the initiation of more analytical studies by political scientists and research workers from government departments, and the determination of present policy on the basis of past experience. Meanwhile private scholars, utilizing archival collections

in the prosecution of local and regional studies, are transforming state history from the rehearsal of well-worn stories of frontier days into careful, thorough narratives of economic developments and political events and trends. The interests and efforts of all of these groups are deserving of the stimulus and encouragement that the improvement of state archives affords.

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