

# A Tar Heel Archivist and His Problems<sup>1</sup>

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IN this paper I shall deal with the following points: (1) the condition of our archives when I began my present work, (2) what we have done to solve our immediate problems, and (3) how we visualize the long-range program of the future. I went to work for the North Carolina Department of Archives and History on August 1, 1947, as researcher; and on May 12, 1948, I was promoted to my present position as head of the division of archives and manuscripts. At first I signed my letters State Records Officer, a title which seemed to work well until a patron addressed me as State Wreckers Officer. Now the title State Archivist is considered more appropriate.

Now what had been accomplished by the former archivists? They succeeded in having the major part of the old records of the State agencies and counties transferred to the archives, and they had been collecting rather actively in the field of private and unofficial manuscripts. There was an excellent map collection of some 2,000 pieces, relating to the State as a whole, the counties, the municipalities, and other areas. These former archivists had gained a great deal of prestige for our agency. They had pioneered, but from the modern standpoint they had neglected certain things.

We were sadly lacking in equipment. In the matter of control a great deal of detailed work had been done on a few records while a sizable backlog of uncontrolled material accumulated. Almost nothing had been done in the field of modern records administration except for a survey of the records of several State agencies made during 1946 and 1947. One is constrained to say, therefore, that the former archivists looked upon their establishment as a jewel box. Certainly many of the State's historical treasures were there.

## SETTING UP A PROGRAM TO MEET OUR IMMEDIATE NEEDS

We have accelerated our program in working with our State's

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists held at Annapolis, Maryland, October 16, 1951.

100 counties. The various county officials have asked us for advice on the proper filing, disposal or preservation, and photographic reproduction of their records. In almost all cases we have made trips to these counties in order to go more carefully into their problems. In a few cases we have met with boards of county commissioners in order to study these problems. For the past 2 years I have addressed the annual conventions of the North Carolina Society of Clerks of Superior Court and more recently I talked to the North Carolina Society of Tax Supervisors.

During the biennium 1948-50 we wrote 2,700 letters in response to requests for genealogical information, and since the end of that period we have written 1,500 such letters. In every case we have tried to render the maximum amount of service consistent with the limitation of our staff. In all cases it has been our policy to make routine checks of the various indexes to our records. We do not undertake to pursue detailed research for private persons. By the use of various forms we have been able to reduce considerably the amount of time spent on this correspondence. As a matter of fact, a very small percentage of our time has been consumed in this type of activity.

We have constantly tried to improve our relations with the public, the various State agencies, the counties, and the municipalities, and we have constantly borne in mind that the archivist is a public servant. Moreover, we have been conscious of the fact that it is essential to know the people who create records as well as those who use them. Good liaison is good business for an archival agency.

Our department has succeeded in obtaining better trained personnel. During the spring of 1951 the State's Personnel Department reclassified every one of our employees, with substantial increases in pay for all the professional workers. Our salary scales, therefore, compare favorably with the national average for similar positions. We appreciate the efforts that many of you made in our behalf in sending your salary ranges to the Personnel Department. All four people who have been added to our division of archives and manuscripts have history backgrounds, and all are at least college graduates. Two hold master's degrees and one has completed his courses for the master's degree. One of them took the internship course which our department offers in cooperation with Meredith College.

Since there was a sizeable backlog of uncontrolled records and increased numbers of records were being received, we were confronted by the problem of bringing records under control quickly.

How could the public be told what records were in the archives? How could the search room attendant locate the records quickly and easily? In order to answer these questions, we used a system of checklists and inventories. The former are used by the search room attendant, the latter to let the public know what is in the collections or record groups. We hasten to point out, however, that it is difficult to distinguish between checklists and inventories in all cases. In order to render these finding media more effective, it was necessary to make several major changes in the physical arrangement of the stack areas. The rooms were labeled with Roman numerals, the stacks with letters, and the sections with Arabic numerals. Now we do not get lost in the stack areas.

As a result of these developments it was considered an appropriate time to take an inventory of the official records and private and unofficial manuscripts in our custody. This inventory, however, was not intended to give a detailed description of each collection or record group. Each sheet included only the title of the collection or group, the date of the inventory, inclusive dates of the records, their quantity computed in cubic feet, a summary of their contents, and any additional data concerning the degree to which the records were controlled. These inventories proved to be the basis for bringing under control several valuable groups of records.

We believe that it is better to have some control of all records than to have minute control of a few records and no control whatsoever of others. Our policy, therefore, has been to gain at least top control of all records as soon as they are received, with the ultimate objective of tightening the control of many of them. Every collection or group accessioned during the past 3 years was carefully weeded and brought under some degree of control the day it was shelved.

It was discovered that the card catalog system, previously used to a limited extent, needed an overhaul. In a few cases it was serving its purpose well. For example, the map collection was adequately controlled by this method, but in many other cases as many as 50 cards existed where one or two would more efficiently serve the same purpose. In revising this system, the watchword was simplicity. Many of us here recall the Model T Ford. That ugly duckling, well known for its bucking and skipping, received its spark from an ignition system so heavy that no two of us could conveniently carry it. When Ford changed over to the Model A in 1928, he had produced an automobile with a power plant that was surpassed by few in balance and smooth combustion. It received its

spark from an ignition system that one could carry in his hip pocket. So with our card-controls of archives collections.

It is a well-known principle of business administration that in order to do their jobs well, employees must be supplied with necessary equipment. This principle can be applied likewise to archival science. It is only logical, therefore, that we have attempted to furnish our business with the latest equipment. Our efforts have resulted in the installation of three new microfilm readers, two microfilm units (one planetary and one rotary), a fumigating vault, a

It was thought best, therefore, to try to achieve the following three-point program:

- (1) A new warehouse to be used as a records center should be established.
- (2) A central microfilming unit for the State should be established in order to reduce as far as practicable the bulk of the records of the various agencies. The operation of a central unit for the purpose would be cheaper than for each agency to operate its own unit, in that duplication of effort would be avoided and trained personnel provided.
- (3) The General Assembly should be asked to pass a bill giving microcopies of State records the same force in courts as the originals.

To what extent has this program been achieved? The site for the proposed records center has been purchased, and the architect is now working on the plans. The General Assembly of 1951 passed a bill rendering microfilm admissible as evidence. The money for a central microfilm project was appropriated, equipment was secured on a rental basis, three additional persons were employed to work on the project, and it is now functioning under the supervision of the Department of Archives and History's division of archives and manuscripts.

### THE LONG-RANGE PROGRAM

Our immediate problem is to consolidate our gains. But let us look beyond the immediate future and try to foresee some of the things that may well be included in our long-range plans. We may well collect more aggressively in the field of private and unofficial manuscripts. It is safe to assume that there are still many historical treasures hidden throughout the State.

We need a new building. Our present one is multifunctional, housing such other agencies as the Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Conservation and Development, and the Department of Public Welfare. Already there has been developed a strong sentiment in favor of a new building in Raleigh to house the State's various cultural agencies.

There seems to be little doubt that our modern records management program will be further developed. We need to reach the point where our records follow flow-schedules.

We need to move nearer the ideal of bringing our records under tighter control so that they can be serviced quickly and easily. This will require a careful evaluation of our holdings so that we can give priority to the proper groups or collections.

It would be well for us to expand our service to the counties. We visualize the time when we shall have a staff member who can spend his entire time in the field.

Our department needs more publicity. The masses of our people know little or nothing about our functions. The telephone operators have to ask us to repeat when we say archives; more often than not they insist upon pronouncing it "archeeves."

Even though we have achieved just about all the objectives fixed within the past few years, we realize that new problems will arise, that conditions may change, and that our program will need to be modified from time to time. We are confident, however, that if we work hard and remain vigilant, we shall be able to cope with the problems of the future. As a matter of fact, if we could no longer expect new problems, our work would cease to be interesting.