

The Development of an Archival Program in Minnesota¹

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THE preservation of State records was a recurring theme in Minnesota for 35 years before the present archival program was inaugurated. The Minnesota Historical Society is largely responsible for preserving the many official records that are now part of the archives and for incessantly advocating a comprehensive plan for archives commensurate with the need.

There was an awareness of the importance and value of the State papers as early as 1913, when the legislature appropriated funds for a building to replace the cramped quarters of the society in the basement of the capitol. From that date until the Minnesota Archives Commission was established in 1947, the society pressed for an archives program. It cooperated in two inventories of State records; on several occasions it sponsored legislation that placed the care and preservation of essential noncurrent records under the control of the society; and it repeatedly urged the legislature to provide sufficient personnel to service the archives that continued to be transferred to the society building for permanent storage. Much credit for these activities is due to the initiative and vision of Solon J. Buck and Theodore C. Blegen, former superintendents of the society.

The first survey of State records was made in 1914-15 under the joint sponsorship of the society and the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association. Herbert A. Kellar, who was in charge of the survey, reported that storage conditions were unfavorable and that many records were inaccessible. To make them accessible to State officials and scholars, he suggested that the older records be placed in charge of a commission and that a suitable archives building be constructed. An alternative plan recommended by Mr. Kellar was to empower the historical society to house, service, and administer the archives no longer needed for administrative purposes.

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Annapolis, Maryland, Oct. 16, 1951. The writer has since revised the paper slightly.

The latter plan was recognized by the Minnesota Legislature in 1915. After Mr. Kellar made his report to the society, the governor signed a bill entrusting to the society the responsibility for the care of State archives. In amending the act of 1913 relating to the construction of the new historical building, the legislature directed that the building be suitable for the "care, preservation and protection of State Archives."

The act of 1915, however, was inoperative without further legislation. This was remedied in 1919, when the legislature authorized the society "to act as custodian of state and local archives, and to provide for the collection and administration of public records." This legislation, permissive rather than mandatory, remained unchanged until 1941. Then by an amendment the society was permitted to destroy public records it judged to be without legal, historical, or administrative value, provided that no public document less than 6 years old be destroyed. Thus, from 1915 until the State Archives Commission was created in 1947, the society was recognized in effect as a State department of archives.

In 1928 a resurvey of State archives was financed by the Public Archives Commission and executed under the direction of the Minnesota Historical Society. The survey was in charge of Donald Van Koughnet, then a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. Mr. Van Koughnet found that since the 1914 survey storage conditions had deteriorated rather than improved and that the records were even more difficult to locate because some of the offices had been moved in the intervening 14 years.

By 1943 the condition of the official records had become a problem of major concern. That the society did not have sufficient personnel to conduct an archival program was admitted and emphasized by numerous requests to the State legislature for more staff. Lewis Beeson, acting superintendent, and Grace Lee Nute, curator of manuscripts, were spending a good deal of time on the disposal of useless records. Added to this burden of records disposal was the problem of storage space for archives judged to be of permanent value, and it was urged that legislation be enacted that would create a more efficient and workable procedure for the care of State records.

In 1945 the advices coming from the society received ringing confirmation. The Interim Committee on State Administration and Employment, created in 1943, noted the general dissatisfaction with the current law governing the preservation and destruction of State documents. Its report, made in 1945, included an analysis of the

deficiencies in the law and an observation that the society was not equipped to carry out its provisions. It was recommended that a law be passed setting forth a broad general policy, with power vested in an archives commission to make specific regulations for individual classes of records. It was further recommended that the archives commission be composed of the attorney general, to appraise the legal value of the records; the public examiner, to determine their need for postaudit purposes; the State auditor, to appraise their accounting value; the commissioner of administration, to appraise their administrative value; and the director of the Minnesota Historical Society, to determine their historical value.

Such a commission was created in 1947 when the legislature passed the Minnesota State Archives Act. The legislators, following the recommendations of the Interim Committee, provided for an archives commission that was independent of the society. Composed of the five State officials that had been suggested, the commission was empowered to engage personnel to enable it to perform its duties. It was granted authority to direct the destruction, sale for salvage, or other disposition of State records determined to be of no lasting value; to microfilm, photograph, or otherwise reproduce records that must be retained permanently. In addition, the act placed in the custody of the Archives Commission all the State records that had poured into the Minnesota Historical Society building for more than a quarter of a century. Although the society had accepted fewer records for permanent storage after 1941, when it received authority to destroy nonessential records, a mass of record material had accumulated from 1919 to 1947. These State records, the responsibility of the Archives Commission since 1947, have remained in various rooms and stack levels in the society building because the legislature made no provision to accommodate the State archives in any other structure.

Some of the archives that the society had accepted before 1947 had been arranged, calendared, and stored in boxes in the manuscripts department of the society, but most of the records had not been segregated. More serious, the records were stacked haphazardly in two subterranean rooms, the only available storage space in the building. In these rooms, where construction had never been completed, the records were piled in a variety of makeshift containers, dilapidated cardboard boxes, and wooden crates, and were exposed to dirt, mold, dampness, and fire.

Although the Archives Commission realized the need for the care of historical documents, the disposition of useless records en-

cumbering State offices and storage vaults was imperative. In an attempt to reduce the bulk of records, an experiment in microphotography was begun in 1948 on a limited scale with one rented camera and a small staff. Chosen for microfilming were records in the Office of the State Auditor — warrants and supporting documents of the Rural Credit Bureau and the Department of Highways. In 18 months, 1,000 cubic feet of storage space was cleared. The task ahead, however, was formidable. Records were cramming every available space, occupying expensive filing equipment and areas urgently needed for other purposes. After carefully studying the experiment in microphotography to see if the best use was being made of the funds appropriated and if the program was adequate to meet the records problem, the commission found that with one camera the staff of three or four could not even keep up with the current accumulation in the one office. At the rate the material in the auditor's office was being filmed, it would take 46 years and \$299,000 of State money to complete the filming of the 22,000,000 warrants then on file in the office, to say nothing of the records accumulated and piling up in other departments and agencies of the State. Since many more cubic feet of storage space was being cleared by a limited disposal program than by microfilming, the commission decided that expending the major portion of the funds on microphotography was not the wisest use of the appropriation, and the microfilming project was discontinued.

The commission felt that its experience in microfilming had demonstrated that the most effective and economical program would be to accelerate the destruction of nonessential records. Even with a limited disposal program, from 1947 through 1949 approximately 30,000 cubic feet of records had been cleared from buildings owned or rented by the State. Disposition of records was made through application by State departments to the commission. An application form with space for records description was filled in by the department requesting disposition of records. After the application was submitted, the commission made an investigation and took action on the request.

To help formulate plans that would be sufficiently broad to solve the immediate and long-range record problems of the various State departments, the commission in 1950 appointed an archivist to its staff. Granted wide latitude in developing and maintaining a State-wide archival program, the archivist is responsible to the commission but works under the direction of the society's director, who is ex-officio secretary of the Archives Commission.

The archivist speeded up records disposition by sending out a bulletin urging all 105 departments and agencies of the State to submit applications for records disposal. In the bulletin, the archivist announced another phase of the program. It was clear both to department heads and to the commission that the work of the archivist would be carried to the source of records creation. Through records inventories in each department, schedules will be established for the regular destruction of records no longer useful, and filing procedures will be developed to segregate temporary records from those having permanent value. Since the archivist has only one assistant, the departments had to provide sufficient personnel to inventory their own records. Two forms were issued for the guidance of the departments making the inventories. The first explained why the inventories were necessary and gave direction for the use of the second, a work sheet with space allotted to each classification of the essential information.

In September 1951 records inventories were begun in two departments, the Department of Administration and the Office of the State Auditor. Inventories were begun in these departments first because their records, central to the administration of the State, are duplicated in different forms in other departments. The commissioner of administration and the auditor informed key personnel in their departments of the objectives of the inventory. They distributed the forms and requested the full cooperation of their staffs in doing the job completely and expeditiously. To date two completed inventories have been received from divisions of the departments. When all the inventories have been received, it will be possible to eliminate inactive records, to isolate records of permanent value, and to work out retention schedules with department heads. The inventories will be extended to other departments as soon as the returns from the first two have been analyzed.

While this work was going on, the archivist and his assistant began to organize records transferred to the Minnesota Historical Society building for permanent storage. Because the papers of the governors are of prime importance to searchers they were chosen as the first group to be processed. The papers had come from the Governor's Office in installments from 1919 to 1951. In the various groups there were many kinds of filing, ranging from subject divisions to a chronological sequence. Before the creation of the Archives Commission, the manuscripts department of the historical society had prepared a tentative inventory of the governors' papers that arrived in 1919 and 1930. In the interval, however, the organ-

ization of the records had become so confused that even the calendar was not an accurate guide.

With the 1951 transfer the Archives Commission had in its custody papers of the governors from 1849 to 1943. The staff reviewed and systematized the work done in the earlier records by the manuscripts department, moved the papers into new folders, made accurate labels, and transferred the information from the labels to an inventory sheet. Work has been completed on records for the period from 1849 to 1884. When the entire group has been sorted, analyzed, labeled, and boxed, the resultant inventory will be duplicated for the use of searchers and other institutions.

The long-range plans of the archivist call for an extension of this type of inventory to other groups of historical records that have been transferred to the commission. Among the records that are in common use by searchers are those of the secretary of state, the surveyor general of logs and lumber, and the attorney general. Each inventory will be duplicated upon completion. The staff also will prepare inventories of records that should be made known to the public even though they have not been transferred from the offices for permanent storage.

The future holds much for the archival program in Minnesota. The commission has made a beginning, drawing upon the experience of its own past as well as that of other States. The objectives of additional staff, adequate storage space, accelerated disposition of useless records, records control at the source, the proper care of permanent records, and the preparation of inventories and guides are high on the list of the archivist as he moves into his second year.