

# Municipal Archives and Records Center of the City of New York<sup>1</sup>

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THE City of New York is finally catching up with over two centuries of neglect in the care of its records. Not only has an archives been established for the preservation of its historically valuable records, but a money-saving records management program has also been instituted.

These developments of the past 2 years originated in the December 1939 appointment by Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia of a Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee to improve the city's control over its records. Committee surveys soon found that records were being stored in over 2,000 different places, "not only in offices but in basements, attics, piers and bridgeheads . . . in a deplorable condition," and that "a great deal of valuable office space was occupied by inactive records, long since obsolete." It was disclosed, for example, that of 2,610,000 square feet of working space in 1940 in 15 selected municipal buildings, 517,000 square feet or close to 20 percent was occupied by records, including 130,700 square feet with an annual rental value of \$200,000 occupied by old and inactive records.

Such critical findings were not new. Herbert L. Osgood's pioneering 1900 report on New York's archives, prepared for the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, showed that the city's records had long been neglected. Records were scattered all over, he said, uncared for and often lost, with little accommodation for research. "Nothing short of a radical change in the method of dealing with them," he concluded, "will be sufficient to render them practically available for the purposes of historical or legal inquiry."

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the following principal sources: a visit to the Municipal Archives and Records Center (MARC), Dec. 29, 1952; discussions with representatives of the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee, the Division of Analysis of the city's Bureau of the Budget, and the Office of the Comptroller; Rebecca B. Rankin, *Summary Report of the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee From December 1939 to June 20, 1952*; the *New York Times*; New York City's *Manual of Procedures* for its records management program; and the *Record*, Mar. 1953.

Osgood's survey resulted in no major improvements by the city. The spadework of the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee, however, headed by Rebecca B. Rankin, librarian of the Municipal Reference Library, a branch of the New York Public Library, brought favorable and action-producing attention. The committee proposed the acquisition of a suitable building for use as an economical and safe central storage depository for the records of all city departments. As a result, on June 24, 1943, the Board of Estimate authorized the expenditure of \$500,000 for such a building, to be financed by the issuance of serial bonds and tax notes. Acting on this authority the city bought for \$490,000 the Rhinelander Building at 238 William Street, Manhattan.

Erected in 1896 on the site of a house built and occupied by William Rhinelander in 1763, the building is very conveniently located only one block east of the Municipal Building (housing many of the city's departments), and the City Hall (containing the mayor's office and the city council rooms). It consists of one 10-story and two 12-story connected structures. The building was designed to handle large printing presses and thus can easily bear the weight of records. It provides 2 million cubic feet of fireproof storage space and has ample elevator facilities. At the time of purchase, the building was being used by the city under a 2-year lease at an annual rental of \$35,000 with a purchase option. The Municipal Archives and Records Center at present needs and uses only two floors. Part of the building is still occupied by private tenants on a month-to-month low rental basis.

From 1941 through 1945 the mayor's committee found it expedient to center its efforts on persuading the departments to salvage useless records as a paper-saving measure. Although previously the Department of Sanitation had burned such records after their destruction was authorized, the committee was able to effect a permanent change in the disposal system, enabling such records to be sold for waste paper by the Salvage Division of the Department of Purchase. As a result 3,688 tons were sold during the period 1942-45.

To facilitate these efforts the committee established a system whereby each city department was requested by the mayor to appoint a departmental liaison officer with the committee. In addition, space was allotted in the Rhinelander Building to any department requesting it. Soon many departments were "garaging" large quantities of inactive records there.

With the departure of Mayor LaGuardia from office, the mayor's committee was terminated in 1945. The Rhinelander Building con-

tinued to be used, however, as a records "garage" under the policy supervision of Miss Rankin.

The committee was reactivated on January 23, 1948, by Mayor William O'Dwyer as one of the results of a sharply critical report on city administrative methods made to him on January 12, 1948, by the Citizens' Budget Commission. The commission report had charged that large amounts of worthless records were occupying much valuable space and that office management and operating methods were very inefficient.

In reestablishing the committee the mayor assigned it responsibility for formulating policies on records management, including policies for the administration of the Rhinelander Building as a projected Municipal Archives and Records Center. The mayor requested the committee particularly "to plan for the prompt disposition of unnecessary papers and records and to study and recommend methods, including microfilming, for preserving necessary papers and records at a minimum of space."

Miss Rankin, as the leader of a movement for establishing a city archives and initiating a records management program, was reappointed committee chairman. At the beginning the committee was composed of representatives of the City Planning Commission; the Department of Public Works; the corporation counsel; the city clerk; the city register; and the Bureau of Real Estate of the Board of Estimate. Since then it has been increased by representatives of the Bureau of the Budget and the Office of the Comptroller.

Upon the committee's recommendation, the Board of Estimate on March 15, 1950, approved the appointment of a temporary clerical staff to help the committee achieve its objectives. The staff of seven clerks and laborers under a supervisor became permanent on June 30, 1951. For a year this staff, functioning as the Municipal Archives, was organizationally an ad hoc division of the Municipal Reference Library. The latter is located in the Municipal Building near the Rhinelander Building.

After Miss Rankin's retirement from public office on June 30, 1952, her former assistant in the Municipal Reference Library for 26 years, James Katsaros, was named supervisor of the Municipal Archives and Records Center, which was organizationally divorced from the Municipal Reference Library and elevated to branch library status on July 1, 1952. That is its present organizational position. It is expected to remain a part of the library system and not become a separate agency.

In the fall of 1950, to aid the development of the then embryonic agency and to promote records management in general, Luther Gulick of the Mayor's Management Survey Committee, created earlier that year to make a thorough study of municipal management policies and practices, proposed a records management survey. The Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee agreed to his proposal.

On December 7, 1950, therefore, the Board of Estimate approved an expenditure of \$62,000 by the survey committee to finance a study by the National Records Management Council covering the filing, indexing, keeping, making, and disposing of city records. Special pilot studies were made of the records of 5 departments: the Department of Purchase; the Municipal Civil Service Commission; the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity; the office of the borough president of Manhattan; and the Department of Public Works. The Archives staff worked along with council personnel in inventorying, appraising, and developing retention standards, and it did all the clerical work and transferring of records. Simultaneously, similar procedures covered 11 other departments which had records "garaged" in the Rhinelander Building. The council's survey, made under the direction of Emmett J. Leahy, president of the council, was carried out from December 1950 to June 1951, with the final reports submitted to the Mayor's Management Survey Committee on January 16, 1952.

#### MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS CENTER

The Municipal Archives and Records Center, under James Katzaros, has separate archives and records center sections operating on the fifth and seventh floors, respectively, of the Rhinelander Building. The four professionals on the present eight-man staff are classified as librarians rather than archivists, and no change in their job classification is expected. Members of the staff believe that there is more personal and institutional benefit to be obtained from the possibility of interchange of personnel within the large New York Public Library system than would be gained by a more limiting classification as archivists.

The Archives and the records center are two different types of operations. The former has legal custody of all its records; the latter has only physical custody, legal custody remaining with the transferring agency. The public has access to material in the Archives but not to that in the center. The basic objective of the Archives is cultural — to preserve historical records. The basic objective of the

center is economic — to release high-cost office space and filing equipment occupied by inactive records in city agencies by transferring such records to the center for low-cost storage.

The Archives can accession directly only records of the mayor's office. It is limited to receiving only those city agency records "which are not required for either current use or occasional reference" by the agencies but which it regards as possessing archival value. It is not limited, however, to the collection of official records only; it may accession private papers, newspapers, or any other material it deems of relevant historical or other continuing value. The supervisor is not particularly concerned about the fact that much material of archival value that is needed for occasional agency reference cannot come to the Archives. He believes that adequate documentation is provided by the mayor's papers plus departmental reports in his custody.

The Archives has no standard storage or filing equipment. The bulk of its 12,000 cubic feet of material (so estimated in December 1952), however, is in transfer cases. Its most historically important record group is the 2,600 cubic feet of papers of the Office of the Mayor. This includes the complete records of the administrations from that of Mayor Van Wyck in 1898 through that of Mayor LaGuardia, ending in 1945. Some papers and records of earlier mayors from 1840 to 1898 also are included but most such earlier records either were destroyed previously or are in historical society or similar collections. The Archives does expect to receive soon the records of Mayor O'Dwyer's recent term of office. Other major record groups in the Archives include: (1) 3,300 cubic feet of record books of assessed valuations of real estate: Manhattan, 1808-96, and Richmond, 1899-1930; (2) early maps of the City Planning Commission; (3) 240 cubic feet of old coroner's records; (4) a most complete collection of New York City newspapers — some from 1835 and all from 1871 to date; and (5) early photographs.

As yet relatively little reference use has been made of the archives. Reference services in 1952 averaged about 35 a month. Chairs and tables are available for use by researchers but the supervisor has not as yet felt sufficiently prepared to cope with a heavy reference load and thus has not publicized the collection very much. He plans later to foster research in the archives by means of public releases and by cooperation with the history departments of local graduate schools. Typed guides and inventories are available as finding aids to help researchers.

The records center is a larger operation than the Archives. The center accessions records which are inactive but must be retained for varying periods for further occasional reference. The center has not yet developed a rule-of-thumb definition of inactive records in terms of exactly how few references should be made in a given period to a given volume of records for such records normally to be eligible for transfer to the center. The center was first set up as such in 1951. On February 8 of that year the Board of Estimate, upon the recommendation of the National Records Management Council, appropriated \$26,800 to equip half of the seventh floor of the Rhinelander Building as a records center. A later appropriation in December 1951 permitted the other half of the floor to be suitably equipped and provided a total of 45,000 cubic feet of shelving capacity.

Storage equipment in the center consists of steel shelving units of five shelves, on each of which 12 one-cubic foot corrugated cardboard boxes are placed two-high. This shelving system, devised to save shelving equipment costs, also easily accommodates tall volumes. The containers, designed by Mr. Katsaros and his staff and costing 24½ cents apiece, are collapsible boxes with separate overlapping tops. Pulpit ladders provide access to the higher shelves. Each shelf space has a permanent location number which appears on the outside of the box occupying that space. For security and economy purposes, however, no labels as to contents are used on the boxes. Box-by-box inventories are prepared at the time of packing. A Kardex system based on these accession inventories is used as a finding aid. The center assists agencies whenever necessary in packing records in its own boxes and transporting them to the center.

As of December 24, 1952, the center had 15,770 cubic feet of records of temporary value and 16,775 cubic feet of records of permanent value. The latter material is expected to remain in the center and not go to the Archives because of the accessioning limitations upon the Archives. Mr. Katsaros hopes later to have separate locations for permanent and temporary material in the records center. There is no concern over space limitations since there is tremendous room for expansion in the building and the Municipal Archives and Records Center has first priority on the space.

The center reference service load for city agencies fluctuates widely from month to month; for instance, there were 1,367 references in November 1952 and 756 in December. Reference service may be requested by mail, messenger, or telephone. Although the center is prepared to service all city agencies, including courts, in

any of the boroughs, its actual work to date has been primarily with agency offices in Manhattan.

The center maintains a messenger service for the delivery of requested material, with regular deliveries made twice a day, at 11 a.m. and at 3 p.m. Special deliveries at other times are made when materials are urgently needed. Agencies may at any time send their own messengers to the center to pick up material needed for reference. In general, the center's delivery radius is limited to the nearby City Hall area. Materials requested by borough offices of agencies that have their main offices in the City Hall area are delivered to the main offices. In servicing requests, staff members prepare a two-part charge-out, one copy of which is retained in the center and the second copy of which accompanies the record to the requesting agency. The center uses the retained charge-outs to maintain a monthly follow-up control on material delivered to agencies and to make periodic reviews for improving retention schedules.

The center is prepared to provide centralized microfilm services for city agencies. It does not do so for the present, however, as the supervisor opposes the actual development of such services before records scheduling is firmly established, for fear that microfilming would hinder the disposal program. Later such services will be established.

### RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Since 1951 departmental records management operations have been under the guidance and overall administration of a two-man records management section of the Division of Analysis of the Bureau of the Budget, working in conjunction with the Mayor's Municipal Archives Committee and the Office of the Comptroller. Each agency of the city government was asked to designate a records officer, and by June 20, 1952, records management programs were under way in 31 agencies. These programs are but one element in a large-scale city management improvement program centrally administered by the Division of Analysis.

The records management section of the Division of Analysis coordinates the citywide records management program. It gives in-service training courses in records management for agency records officers. It reviews agency records retention schedules and other records management actions, including the relinquishment of surplus filing equipment to a central equipment pool. An important factor in the section's administration of the program has been the "freeze" imposed on budgetary appropriations for new filing equip-



ment. The section reviews all requests for such equipment and seeks to eliminate the need either by encouraging records disposal or transfer or by obtaining the equipment from the central equipment pool. Purchases of equipment have thus been substantially curtailed. The section is also engaged in a major forms-control program, which has included preparation of a large manual for agency use.

Special assistance to agencies is also given by the Municipal Archives and Records Center, upon request, to help develop and improve filing systems or to help appraise records and develop retention schedules. This is in addition to the MARC services described elsewhere in this article.

Agency records officer positions generally are not full-time jobs but are responsibilities assumed in addition to other duties by various department clerks. The records officers receive intensive training in records management techniques in a series of training conferences which are limited to 10 trainees. Four such series had been held by March 1953. After the first session of each series, the records officers proceeded to organize the records programs in their departments; and, at each succeeding session, techniques were developed and progress and problems discussed. Upon completion of their training, records officers were inducted into a city-wide Coordinating Committee, which meets bimonthly to review progress, exchange experiences, and foster esprit de corps. Subcommittees were designated to study special areas and to make recommendations to the Coordinating Committee. One such subcommittee early this year prepared a schedule of recommended retention periods for records common to all agencies, which will serve as a guide in the preparation of departmental retention schedules.

Agency records management programs are concentrating on the development of records retention schedules as the best means of quickly achieving big savings. Such programs are guided in great detail by the *Records Management Program: Manual of Procedures*, issued in July 1952 by the Municipal Archives Committee, Bureau of the Budget, and Office of the Comptroller. No complete figures are available yet as to the city's total records holdings or its annual rate of accretion and disposal. The supervisor believes, however, that more than half of the city's records have been scheduled. Scheduling does not involve the usual continuing or future authority to dispose of specified types of records after the lapse of specified periods of time or after specified occurrences. Scheduling instead provides only standards or guides. Separate disposal authority must be obtained each time records are proposed for destruc-



tion. The principal reason for this is the corporation counsel's responsibility as set forth in the administrative code.

The scheduling process prescribed in the *Manual* outlines three main steps to be followed by agency records officers, each step involving the use of a special form. First, a preliminary inventory and appraisal of records is made; this includes the compilation, for each type of record, of detailed data on the filing equipment occupied, the annual rate of accumulation, and the proposed retention period. From this data an agency records retention schedule is developed and approved by the heads of the appropriate agency units and then by the head of the agency or his deputy. Such a schedule provides, for each type of record, standards as to how long it should be kept, first in office space, and then, if longer retention is necessary, in the records center. After approval of the schedule, records officers must prepare location worksheets providing detailed instructions for putting the schedule into effect in each building or room where records are kept. One copy of the preliminary inventory, 10 copies of the approved schedule, and 1 copy of an agency equipment summary are forwarded to the records management section of the Division of Analysis, Bureau of the Budget.

The agencies bear full responsibility for actually putting the schedules into operation and for periodically requesting disposal authority from the Board of Estimate. The records center uses a tickler control to inform agencies regarding disposal material in center custody. The center also receives a copy of all approved schedules from the records management section. It uses these to provide each agency with an annual reminder of specific records eligible either for transfer to the center or for initiation of disposal action.

The procedure prescribed in the *Manual* for disposing of "obsolete and useless" records requires the requesting agency to send to the corporation counsel, for transmission to the Board of Estimate, 14 copies of a letter requesting disposal authority and 20 copies of an itemized list of the records involved. Two other copies of the list must be sent also to the Municipal Archives Committee. The large number of copies is deemed necessary for more rapid clearing through the corporation counsel and the Board of Estimate. The corporation counsel is required to certify that the requested destruction "will in no wise affect the interests of the city in any pending, anticipated or contemplated action or proceeding by or against such city." The Municipal Archives Committee is required to certify that the records have no historical value. The actual detailed

committee appraisal normally is made by the chairman, Mr. Katsaros; the full committee approval follows routinely. No written justifications of the appraisal recommendations are prepared. Requests approved by the corporation counsel and the Municipal Archives Committee receive routine authorization by resolutions of the Board of Estimate. Such resolutions do not list the records. The board is the final disposal authority since cities over one million in population are not required to obtain disposal approval from the New York State Division of Archives and History.

Once authorized for disposal, records may be sold for waste paper, or, if unsalable, donated for salvage. One method of handling small quantities is to send the material to the records center, which provides storage for it until enough waste paper has been accumulated to warrant a sale.

New York City's records management program will doubtless be further improved, but the significant thing is that much progress has been achieved, in conjunction with other city management programs, and that New York is assuming a position of leadership in the field of municipal records management.

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