

# Recent Developments in Municipal Records

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**D**E TOCQUEVILLE was not attempting to prophesy when he wrote his *Democracy in America* more than a century ago. He was an acute observer of conditions at that time:

The public administration is, so to speak, oral and traditional. But little is committed to writing, and that little is soon wafted away forever like the leaves of the Sibyl, by the smallest breeze. . .

I am convinced that in fifty years it will be more difficult to collect authentic documents concerning the social condition of the Americans at the present day than it is to find remains of the administration of France during the Middle Ages. . .

The instability of administration has penetrated into the habits of the people; it even appears to suit the general taste, and no one cares for what occurred before his time: no methodical system is pursued, no archives are formed and no documents are brought together when it would be very easy to do so. Where they exist, little store is set upon them. . .

Unfortunately those conditions have not yet vanished altogether. Though our local governments are no longer oral and traditional, it is still generally true that "no methodical system is pursued, no archives are formed and no documents are brought together."

There are, however, exceptions; and it is principally those exceptions that I intend to consider here.

The history of the investigation into municipal records by the Society of American Archivists is not long. The first committee for that purpose was appointed in 1941, and its work eventually resulted in the compilation of a pamphlet on public records that was published by the Public Administration Service in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Other than this pamphlet, which in reality is a general manual for the

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<sup>2</sup> *Public Records Management, PAS Publication No. 103.*

guidance of local records officers, the committee issued no literature.

This is not to say that the field of municipal records did not warrant study by the Society nor that the people engaged in surveying the subject lacked skill and energy. Rather it is probably an indication that Society members have an overriding interest in other fields and that cities themselves lack consciousness of their records problems.

The reasons why that picture is now changing are worth a brief appraisal. Probably the tremendous interest in what has come to be called records administration is the largest single contributing factor. Where formerly the Federal Government, certain States, some large historical societies, and isolated local organizations were interested in archival economy, the field has now been broadened by the principles advanced by records administration to include business records. I believe it is no coincidence that, with business and industry providing the stimulus, methods of records administration have undergone a tremendous change. This could not help but be noticed by municipal officials, who are invariably brought face to face with business techniques in the operation of their daily routines. Intelligent and efficient records management would appear to be a natural result of this activity.

It can only be a natural result, however, when one can contemplate the whole picture. In almost every instance, the records of a city are in the care of its separate departments. Often these departments forward their noncurrent files to the city clerk or secretary for retention, but often too the files are stored at their point of origin. The potential here for trouble is evident.

In the former instance, the clerk becomes caretaker of a heterogeneous collection that seldom has any standardized forms, controls, or content. He is faced with the dilemma of storing ledgers, boxes, cabinets, bundles, rolls, and just plain scrap, covering the subjects of land, finance, personnel, and so on — the departmental operations, in short, of the whole diverse function of city government. Worse, he is seldom permitted to act independently on storing and servicing these files. That authority remains at the point of origin.

When the records are kept by the several departments, the picture worsens. We have most of the aforementioned evils plus some new ones. Lack of communication between the various branches and divisions of government generally precludes effective interchange of information and techniques. Retention of records is subject to the whimsey of the current head of the department or to some archaic

law just as whimsical. The task of anyone seeking information that cuts across departmental lines is almost hopeless.

In either case certain problems are present in varying degree: gross waste of storage facilities and equipment; an inestimable loss of important information and historical documents; a steadily declining rate of efficient servicing of the records; frequently a duplication of facilities or manpower; in general, a sorry mess.

This is not to say that nothing has been done. Quite the contrary. In practically every instance studied by the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Municipal Records, *some* efforts are being made to alleviate the distress. These efforts, however, are frequently uncoordinated spontaneous remedies, which at best serve only to palliate and do not heal the basic ills.

The technological explosion touched off by the typewriter is now in the electronic stage. It is almost absurd to expect any one department head to be an expert in his own field and at the same time keep pace with the striding developments in records control. New machines, new techniques, new philosophies have advanced at a dizzying pace in the past 20 years. In desperation the person responsible for the management of a city's records tries a gimmick here or a gadget there. He is prime prey for the glib salesmen of forms, of office equipment and machines, and even lately of the packaged records program.

I want to be clearly understood, at this point, before going further. I contend that records administration is a profession, demanding highly developed skills and techniques. Further, the industry providing the physical adjuncts of a records program (office equipment, paper forms, duplication services) is legitimate and necessary and frequently leads the field in pioneering new methods and materials. It is obvious that the tremendous mechanical improvements in office equipment and machines that have so streamlined clerical routines has resulted in the flood of paper by which local governments are now inundated. Furthermore, that flood has resulted in the recent developments in the field of records administration. There can be no logical progress in records work, consequently, without the cooperation of the industries supplying this equipment.

Most cities, however, are now faced with the necessity of adapting an *integrated* records program to their *specific* needs. For this, no pat routine or packaged deal will suffice.

Municipal records, like most others, fall into four major categories. First are the records considered necessary in current operations; second, the many retained according to legal statutes or

financial practice; third, the highly indeterminate number that are of historical interest and that, because of the highly specialized skills required to analyze their value, are frequently neglected by city officials; and, fourth and greatest in bulk, those records no longer of any conceivable value, which no one has yet had the guts or good sense to destroy. It is in this last category that the most spectacular progress can be made by anyone wanting to give a hasty and impressive showing in revamping the records management program of any particular city. With already existing retention manuals, copies of applicable public acts relating to the local records, a modicum of common sense, and political discretion, this fourth type of records can be made to justify any intelligently integrated records program. It is here that one encounters the startling savings in salvaged office equipment, office space, and personnel.

Unfortunately, however, too many programs stop at this point, considering that efforts have been well rewarded by a thorough and profitable housecleaning.

Although the destruction of useless records is vital and on the whole most necessary, it must not be allowed to obscure the other three areas of the problem. There remain the current records, the historical records, and the inactive or noncurrent records, each requiring special and different consideration yet each to be dovetailed into a uniformly balanced and efficiently functioning program. There must be a systematic and continuing flow of records from the originating office into low-cost storage and finally to the waste-paper dealer. The historical and permanently valuable documents, of course, would receive attention at some point in this flow. This attention, ideally, would be given by a qualified archivist and a city-administered archives. Though this concept presupposes a city of size and wealth, smaller municipalities could certainly apply it to their records center or their public library.

Briefly, the complete city-administered records management program would involve several or all of the following components in varying combinations. First of all a survey should be made of the existing records and the methods of their creation. On the basis of this survey approximately 50 percent of the accumulation of records in most cities could be destroyed. Another 25 percent would be considered current and would remain in the office of origin. The final 25 percent would come under the heading of inactive or historical records and should be provided with low-cost storage and efficient finding aids for prompt servicing. Standardization would be desirable for all equipment involved, although initially there would

probably be a surplus of filing equipment due to the destruction of obsolete records. Sources and procedures should be streamlined, and a firm control should be exercised over them and over the creation of records. The quality and design of forms should be standardized. The abandoning of storage facilities in high-cost areas would call for the creation of separate records centers; these in themselves often provide startling savings in space and cost and usually afford a measurable increase in fire protection and reference service. The entire program can be administered by the city with its present employees, with recruited manpower having the necessary competence, or with the service of records management consultants. All three have been used in the past with success.

As with any other onerous task, such a wholesale housecleaning of a city's records requires a strong stimulus. First of all there must exist a knowledge of the problem, with the required energy and competence to bring it to the consciousness of the officials in authority; second, the program must receive the wholehearted cooperation of those officials.

All these factors make one conclusion plain: the records of a city present a complex picture, which does not lend itself readily to hasty analysis. The Committee on Municipal Records was faced with the fact that there is practically nowhere to turn for statistics relating to this problem. I considered the idea of a questionnaire addressed to the municipalities to be premature, but it was nevertheless necessary as a jumping-off point.

During the past year 108 cities with populations in excess of 100,000 were queried with regard to their records progress. Over 85 percent responded in greater or less detail. Simultaneously the legal aspects of the local records problem were investigated through correspondence with the attorney general of each State. Individuals prominent in the field of public records were asked for their experiences and opinions. Two leading records management consultants have cooperated wholeheartedly. Finally, an effort has been made to encourage cooperation between the professional municipal organizations, many of whom already have committees working on the problem, and the Society of American Archivists, which is of course interested in the areas of education and promotion. Many cities and local governmental units have been investigated personally and several are represented on the committee by their records supervisors.

A detailed breakdown of all findings to date would be superfluous here even if time and interest warranted. There are, however, cer-

tain examples of developments that have been observed, which I feel to be of general interest.

It has not been at all unusual, when the committee has queried a city about its records program, to receive an answer to the general effect that there is no program, no records officer, and no problem. This is not, however, the rule. Most cities are well aware of what they are up against and are making sincere although sometimes misguided efforts to correct the situation. On the bright side of the picture is the definite progress being made in many localities. Most of you are familiar with the remarkable work done by Philadelphia and New York City in their records programs. Several articles have already been published in the *American Archivist* about these programs, but certain conclusions and recent developments are pertinent here.

It is significant, I believe, that both cities are very large and operate under a form of home rule in States that otherwise maintain control over local records. Thus it is possible for both to pursue their own records course without considering State legislation on the subject. (I am excluding here of course those local records that are obviously State-controlled due to overriding legislation; that is, certain court records.) Both cities became sufficiently aware of their mounting problems to give an unusual amount of authority to their study commissions and records officers. Both have received tremendous benefits in economies of space and expenditure, increased efficiency in their operations, and increased services to their various participating departments and to the public.

The beginnings and progress, to 1953, of the records management program in New York City have been sketched by Jason Horn in the *American Archivist*.<sup>3</sup> By now 45 city agencies have been brought into the system through the training course to which each department sends its selected records officer. During this course, methods are devised whereby each participating agency is made an integral part of the overall plan. This overall program in New York thus far includes: preliminary inventorying and appraisal of records; records retention schedules; records disposition, including transfers to the records center and destruction of useless papers; the determination of requirements for space and filing equipment, including control of such equipment and transfer of any surplus; and the use of the facilities and reference services of the records center.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 16:311-320 (Oct. 1953).

<sup>4</sup> *Records Management Program of the City of New York* (Bureau of the Budget [New York City], Division of Analysis, Dec. 1954).

There are still a number of items remaining for future consideration by New York. A forms-control program has yet to be inaugurated, provision of microfilming facilities in the records center is being considered pending a study on the justification of microfilming, a study of filing systems currently used is contemplated, and the preservation and protection of vital records will be accelerated. This last project was inaugurated in August 1943 by an appropriation of over half a million dollars for the reproduction of land records. The film will be stored in the records center and the original volumes outside the target area.

It is interesting to note that the entire system calls for voluntary cooperation under the administrative guidance of the director of the budget, the controller, and the Municipal Archives Committee. The Archives and Records Center itself is a branch of the public library system, and its personnel are classified librarians. The only legal basis for operations is the City Administrative Code, which calls for review of the records retention schedules by the parties most concerned.

Philadelphia owes its outstanding records program to the early efforts and preliminary surveys and recommendations of the Pennsylvania Economy League dating back to 1950.<sup>5</sup> On January 7, 1952, Philadelphia's home-rule charter, providing for the establishment of a Department of Records, became operative. Philadelphia is the only major city giving its records administration full departmental status on an equal basis with other major municipal departments.

Within the Department of Records and operating under the commissioner of records are the deputy commissioner in charge of the deeds division, and the deputy commissioner in charge of the Archives and Records Division. The Archives and Records Division is further divided into the archives and records storage center under the Archivist, and the forms and records control section.

The functions of the Department of Records may be divided into two broad categories; those prescribed by the Philadelphia city charter and those prescribed by State legislation. The deeds division operates in accordance with State legislation and its chief function is the recording of deeds, mortgages, and other land-title instruments. Under the Archives and Records Division fall the charter-governed functions. These include the preparation of standards and specifications relating to all municipal records, which insures

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Amelia, "Philadelphia Records and a Program for Administration," in *American Archivist*, 14:47-57 (Jan. 1951).



control over forms, filing systems, and records management, including the retention or disposition of records and archival preservation. The Archives, rare in itself among municipalities, evaluates, collects, classifies, and services those records of permanent historical, administrative, legal, or cultural value.

The expenditures of the department are large, totaling \$526,808.18 in 1953. Material savings, however, have been effected through disposal of waste paper and transfers to the records center. During the years 1952 and 1953, \$103,342.78 was realized by the city through the sale of scrap paper, floor space released for further use, and the salvage of filing equipment. The value of increased service and streamlined operations cannot be estimated.

Microfilming of deeds is used extensively; it is expected that by the end of 1954 some 750,000 deeds will have been recorded, representing 3,000,000 pages. Negative film copies are being kept in remote and safe storage and positive copies are retained for current use. The use of microfilm for the preservation of vital records is being explored in various pilot projects.<sup>6</sup>

San Francisco has recently inaugurated a complete records administration program. This action has been taken in accordance with surveys, pilot projects, and the recommendations of a professional records consultant. It is probably the only case in the country in which an integrated program covers the records of both city and county. The initial survey and the installation were made in 1951. The resulting program is complete in that it deals with forms control, filing control, and records control. A records center has been built in the past year for the storage and servicing of inactive files. The ordinance establishing this system might well serve as a model for use by other cities. It is explicit in establishing the lines of authority, defining procedures, and outlining the general areas of responsibility.

Although it is still too soon to draw any factual conclusions as to efficiency of operation and resulting economy, we can reasonably assume that the situation is greatly improved. Some fear may exist that future operations might be hampered by a program that is spelled out too explicitly, with a possible lack of flexibility to cope with changing methodology and demands.

Several other cities, for example Los Angeles and Tacoma, have made tentative efforts to control their records problems through the employment of office-systems consultants. This, so far as we have been able to determine, has resulted in more efficient filing pro-

<sup>6</sup> Department of Records, City of Philadelphia, *Annual Report*, 1953.



cedures and office routines, but in no case has it provided for a complete across-the-board records management program.

Microfilm is being increasingly utilized by cities to reduce the bulk of their records. The virtues and shortcomings of microfilm are not properly a topic for discussion here. I have noted the judicious use of microfilm by the cities of New York and Philadelphia, and in the same category I might place the microfilming project currently in progress in Houston.

The Houston tax division of the treasury department is microfilming its old tax rolls in approximately 10,000,000 images. The police department is converting all its old permanent records to microfilm, including arrest cards, identification cards, and offense reports. Adequate finding aids are being provided for these filmed records. A drawback here is that the originals are being destroyed and only one negative film image is retained, with resultant lack of security in the event of a catastrophe and danger of attrition through time and use.

There does seem to be, however, a tendency on the part of many department heads to consider microfilm as an end in itself to their records problems. It is increasingly evident that many local units are microfilming their records wholesale, without sufficient planning or integration.

The cost of microfilm, like the cost of a complete records program, is subject to infinite variations. It would be extremely unwise to attempt to set up a standard or rule-of-thumb cost of microfilming records. It is equally true that the phenomenal savings of scientific records management are often worth a second look. At times salesmanship tends to run away from the facts. Actually the value of both operations is manifest without citation of phony or inflated figures.

Current records control presents relatively few genuine problems; that is, of course, assuming that a records program has been given the green light and is enjoying the cooperation of the city administration. Manuals of procedures and form design have been plagiarized for so many years that they are now in the public domain. These, plus sound business-office methods and an occasional nod to political expediency, have worked wonders already in several cities.

The Department of Utter Confusion takes over when the program faces up to the inactive and obsolete records. The question here is what can or cannot be destroyed, what should or should not be retained. Probably the most important element in this confusion is the role of the State in the administration of municipal records.

The question basically is: Who owns the public records of a municipality, the State or the local unit? This question, while generally unanswered, is important because it will determine who is to establish authorizing legislation for municipal records management. State legislation would insure a uniformity of records programs within the State. We might even be led to hope and work for interstate cooperation for uniform legislation on records management.

This wish is not idly voiced. In a recent survey conducted by the Committee on Municipal Records among the attorneys general of the 48 States, only 12 of the 35 respondents could give a definite answer; and of these, 5 reported that ownership lay with the State and 7 with the local unit. Fifteen others were less certain; 5 believed ownership lay with the State, 10 with the local unit. Seven replies were inadequate or irrelevant, and one man frankly said he did not know. There is obviously a definite lack of uniformity in State legislation regarding the administration of public records. This is not to say that interstate uniformity is essential, but it does indicate one reason for the delay in a general movement toward modern municipal records management programs. It also points up the reason for the often dissimilar methods adopted by various municipalities in seeking relief from their records problems. There is room here, I believe, for some pioneer efforts to secure uniform legislation on this subject.

As a result of the generally inadequate legislation throughout the national scene, it is frequently impossible to operate vigorous records management programs. We find municipal governments turning to State Archivists, State departments of administration, historical commissions, and historical societies, either as directed by statute or in desperation. Other problems are linked with the primary one of inadequate legislation. They might be listed briefly as lack of centralized control of records creation and records management, inadequate records storage facilities, outdated records retention schedules, that tend to maintain records far longer than their useful life, and uncontrolled microfilming.

Increasingly, local governments are turning to professional records consultants for advice. As an example of this trend I might cite the following recent or pending surveys and projects: Montgomery County, Md., the State of Maryland, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the city of New York, the city and county of San Francisco, the cities of Providence, R. I., Milwaukee, Wis., and Detroit, Mich., Wayne County, Mich., the State of Michigan, and the State of Rhode Island. This is only a sampling, but it indicates the magni-

tude of the operations of records consultants. Although they do not, in most instances, go beyond a survey or pilot installation, this is frequently enough to stimulate the local or State government to inaugurate a complete records program of its own.

In one of the more recent of these surveys, conducted in a large middle western county, the records consultant plans, over a period of 39 weeks, to inventory the records, dispose of the obsolete files, set up retention schedules and manuals of procedure, and train city employees — for a fee of \$37,500. Though this appears on the surface to be large, the savings during the first year should amount to at least that sum.

Not all cities, however, consider it necessary to go beyond their own boundaries for records experts. An example here would be the city of San Jose, Calif., which at the present time is engaged in what might be called a self-help program. It is setting up and administering office methods, forms control, files control and records control programs, all in accordance with self-determined retention and disposal schedules and procedures manuals.<sup>7</sup> The city authorities feel that many cities of comparable size and smaller will ultimately do the same thing, because of difficulty in obtaining a records center and the cost of hiring outside experts. With this particular example in mind I hesitate to say that there is a definite trend toward the employment of professional records experts as contractual consultants to the cities.

I believe there is, in the entire field of municipal records, an awakening interest on the part of the municipalities themselves. It is gratifying to note the efforts put forth by such organizations as the International City Managers Association, the American Municipal Association, the Municipal Finance Officers Association, and the National Institute of Municipal Clerks. All four of these organizations were represented at the 1954 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, and all have expressed an interest in active cooperation with the Society. Through their research facilities and subsequent publications they are doing much to educate those at the operational level in the minimum necessary techniques and procedures of records management. As evidence of their interest and cooperation, they are working at the present time with the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Municipal Records in surveying the problem and proposing standards and guides for the use of the local records officer.

<sup>7</sup> International City Managers Association, *Municipal Records Management and Control*. Management Information Service, Report No. 114, July 1953.

I believe that this state of ferment in the field of municipal records is significant. If we are to push a dynamic program of education throughout the entire records complex then we cannot afford to ignore the fact that the time is ripe for positive and vigorous action in this particular area — and I think we'll get it.

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### SAA ANNUAL MEETING

October 10-11, 1955

As announced in the April issue of this year (p. 187), the Andrew Jackson Hotel will be headquarters for the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Nashville this fall. On Sunday, October 9th at 7 p.m., dinner meetings of the committees of the Society will be held, to be arranged by the respective committee chairman. All meetings of the Society will be held at the hotel except as noted below.

On the morning of October 10th a paper on the protection of documents by lamination will be read by W. K. Wilson, chemist in the Paper Section of the National Bureau of Standards; this will be discussed by other experts in the field of preservation. At the luncheon meeting Robert Shiff of the National Records Management Council will speak on the Archivist's role in records management. In the afternoon, at a session in the new Tennessee State Library and Archives Building, Dan M. Robison will talk on the State archives, and thereafter members and their guests will tour the building. The annual dinner of the Society will be held in the evening, with Morris L. Radoff delivering his presidential address. This will be followed by the business meeting.

The morning session of October 11 will be devoted to the defense of archives against human foes. Robert H. Land of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress will read a paper on this subject, and the paper will be discussed by other authorities. At the luncheon following, Theodore R. Schellenberg of the National Archives will discuss applying American archival experience abroad. The afternoon will be devoted to sightseeing planned by the Local Arrangements Committee.