

The State Archivist and the Researcher

By CHRISTOPHER CRITTENDEN¹

*North Carolina Department
of Archives and History*

A SESSION like the present one, including as it does two groups whose functions sometimes overlap and dovetail but at other times tend to diverge, can be worthwhile to everyone concerned. In the relationship between archivists and manuscript curators on the one hand and researchers on the other, for the most part there have been cooperation and a realization that both groups are working toward the same general purposes. In some instances, however, there has not always been complete understanding by one group of what the other was trying to do and how it sought to function. Some scholars perhaps have thought that archivists and manuscript curators were not making sufficient efforts to preserve official archives or unofficial manuscripts or that, even when such materials have been physically preserved, they were not in every instance made usable and easily available for research. And on the other hand, some of the people in charge of archives and manuscripts may have felt at times that researchers have not always been reasonable in their requests or even demands.

With a little effort and understanding on both sides and with some discussion from time to time of mutual problems, there ought to be no insuperable barriers between us. We have much in common and can be of material aid to each other.

Other participants in this session will approach the relationship between the historian, the archivist, and the manuscript curator from several different points of view. It is the function of this paper to attempt to present the case of the State archivist, to try to tell briefly how the State archivist is seeking to serve the researcher and how he is attempting to solve some of the problems connected with this function.

¹ The writer, Director of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, read this paper before the Southern Historical Association at Memphis, Tennessee, November 11, 1955. At the session on "The Historian and the Archivist," Mr. Crittenden represented State archivists, Howard H. Peckham represented manuscript curators, and Frontis W. Johnston represented historians. The papers of Mr. Peckham and Mr. Johnston are printed elsewhere in this issue.

First of all, your State archivist seeks to save from destruction and to preserve permanently for research use the official records of the various agencies of his State government (and frequently also of the State institutions and of the units of local government). When historical commissions, departments of archives and history, halls of records, or other similar agencies were established in the various States, the first and crying need was to search out and to save the valuable historical materials. We all have heard stories of how these have been found in different stages of decomposition in closets, basements, attics, and ill-suited warehouses, and even on dump heaps or in garbage cans. Your archivist initially saved from imminent destruction large quantities of such unique materials, many of them the records of top-level boards or officials, records extending back for decades or perhaps centuries.

There followed the next steps for the physical preservation of these materials: cleaning, fumigating, repair (in the early days by silking, often, more recently, by lamination), and preservation in areas where the records would be as nearly protected as possible from fire, moisture, insects, and other enemies. In these latter years, air-conditioning has come to be a boon in the effort to ensure the physical preservation of records.

Thus the archivist first sought to save and preserve the records of undoubted historical significance. In the beginning these were chiefly the older records. Within the recent past there has arisen a new problem — that of dealing with modern records. As we all know, there has occurred during the past few decades a vast increase in the quantity of records created by government agencies at practically all levels. The archivist has been compelled to face this problem. Offices or other areas became filled to overflowing with records and frequently the demand arose for these materials to be moved out — in many cases on short notice. There was an obvious danger that valuable historical materials would be destroyed, and thus many of the State archivists “moved in” for the purpose of preventing such destruction. For a time such action was pretty much hit-or-miss, higgledy-piggledy, but after a while more orderly procedures were developed. Thus today the State archivists have become active in the field of records administration.

In summary, here is the way the procedure works (with of course certain variations from one State to another). Many of the States have enacted legislation prohibiting the destruction of official records without the approval of the State archives department (often with the advice or assistance of a committee or board of one

type or another). Under this authorization, when an agency needs to get rid of records that seem to have little or no further value for administrative purposes, the archivist undertakes to determine what is worth preserving and what is not. In most instances there is no difficulty in deciding. On the one hand is the vast quantity of materials (probably some 80 or 90 percent of the over-all total) that appears to have no value whatsoever for research — time sheets, routine correspondence, copies of vouchers of which three or more copies are preserved, and many other series that the archivist calls “housekeeping records.” On the other hand there are certain records that undoubtedly ought to be preserved — minutes of boards and commissions, policy-making correspondence of the governors and the heads of various State departments, and other series that throw light on the historical development of the State and its people. Between these two clear-cut areas, however, is a twilight zone where it is not always clear whether records should be preserved or not. What does one do, for example, with the extensive correspondence of a minor official whose duties are of some importance? Are they policy-making records or do they relate mainly only to routine and detail? Here it is that the archivist needs, and frequently requests, outside advice — that of historians, economists, lawyers, and others. Having consulted such experts in different fields, sometimes the archivist is still in doubt. What he probably will do in such a case is to preserve the records for the time being with the idea of reviewing their status again after a period of time.

A great deal more might be said about records administration, but time does not permit. Suffice it to state in the present connection that the archivist is making every effort to preserve those records that appear to have research value.

Having moved the records of permanent value into the archives, the obvious need is to make them available for use. When the archivist first began his work, there was a tendency in many instances to follow library procedures of classification, cataloging, and the like. As time has passed, however, it has come to be realized that the problem of handling archives is different in many ways from that of dealing with books in a library. In fact, some archivists have gone so far as to say that library training is not only of no advantage to the would-be archivist but is an actual handicap — that before working in archives the librarian needs to unlearn so much of what he has already learned that it might have been better not to have had library training in the first place. In the beginning, archivists in various places undertook to catalog bodies of records,

but in most instances today the catalog has either been abandoned or at least been de-emphasized.

How does the present-day archivist attempt to make known and available for research the records in his custody? In the first place, he issues printed or processed guides or lists of these materials, and in serial publications he often includes lists of accessions. In most instances it is out of the question for him to give detailed descriptions; rather, he seeks to present an over-all picture of the various bodies and series of records that are available, indicating in each case the inclusive dates, the approximate quantity, and something about the type of information that may be expected to be found in each group.

Next, and of great importance, is the personal interview. When a researcher comes to ascertain what materials are available on his subject, it has been found that there is nothing that quite takes the place of the archivist's sitting down with the researcher and discussing his problem with him. A great deal of time can be saved by finding out what he has already done and what information he particularly lacks. Having done this, the archivist is in a position to suggest that the desired data can probably be obtained from one or more bodies of records. Clearly, in order to perform this function well, the archivist himself needs a background of training and experience in research and must know a great deal about the records in his custody. In many instances the first interview can be only preliminary. Then, after the researcher has gone further into his problem, additional aid can be obtained from the archivist by means of one or more further interviews. Whatever finding aids there may be, whatever else may be done to assist the researcher, nothing can quite take the place of the personal interview.

The type of finding aid most frequently prepared by archivists is the descriptive inventory. Pioneered and most highly developed by the National Archives, this has come to be used by a number of State archivists. The descriptive inventory represents an effort to make information available regarding a particular body of records. It includes an administrative history of the agency that created the records, a descriptive entry for the various series and their subdivisions, and statements regarding the data contained in each series. Obviously such a descriptive inventory may vary considerably in length and detail. Of course a great deal depends upon the quantity of the records inventoried. Also, in this connection the archivist may seek to evaluate the significance and probable fre-

quency of use of the records, especially if they appear to be highly important and likely to be frequently used.

Another type of finding aid that is frequently needed is the index. Over and over the State archivist is asked the question: "You say you have such and such a body of records. Is it indexed?" If the answer is no — and it most often is — then the implication, either spoken or unspoken, is, "Why isn't it?" Clearly it would be of great advantage to the user if all materials in the archives were indexed in detail — by surname of person, by place name, by subject, and perhaps in other ways. Anyone who has ever worked in the field, however, realizes that the preparation of such indexes of large bodies of records is so time consuming that ordinarily it is completely out of the question. When searchers deplore the absence of indexes, we usually reply to the effect that if they will prevail upon the legislature to give us 20 (or 50 or 200) additional employees, we will undertake at least to begin the task. Until and unless we have another depression and another WPA, or unless there is some totally unexpected development, the prospect for indexing vast quantities of records seems very dim indeed.

Now for a few practical, everyday problems. A short time ago the writer asked a group of historians, meeting informally, for their chief unfavorable criticism of archival institutions (and this might also apply to manuscript depositories), and without hesitation they said that the chief inconvenience they had experienced was the shortness of the hours during which archives or manuscript depositories were open to the public. A scholar will have, say, two weeks to spend in a certain city, working in a particular depository, and yet he finds that the search rooms are open only perhaps from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 5 days a week. He would like to work much longer hours but, of course, cannot borrow manuscript materials and is not permitted access to them outside regular hours. What is the solution to this problem? Probably there is no absolute and final answer, but in the writer's own opinion the archivist ought to make the necessary provision. While of course he must be very careful to preserve the records in his custody, he might well permit a certain flexibility in such matters.

That brings us to another question. To what extent should the archivist (and again also the manuscript curator) prescribe rules for the researcher? At a recent session of the Society of American Archivists there was a discussion of this problem, and it was brought out that the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress had even gone so far as to station in its search room an armed

guard on a raised platform. Various persons told of the rules and regulations that they had put into force. The major premise seemed to be that every researcher is a potential scoundrel and thief, ready at the least opportunity to sneak out manuscripts, to deface them, perhaps even to chew them up and swallow them.

The writer personally cannot subscribe to any such philosophy or procedure. At the North Carolina Department of Archives and History we have no rules to bind and perhaps to hamstring researchers. Of course we have an attendant on duty at all times and very rarely, when it seems that something may be wrong, she proceeds to caution a researcher. But as for such rules as that there can be no use of ink, that typewriters are taboo, that only one item can be used at a time, and the like — we don't have them, and we hope we never will. For 20 years, we have had no known loss of materials by theft and no defacement of any importance.

Certain other matters, for lack of time, I have not gone into, and I shall merely mention two of them here. Your State archivist undertakes to supply photostat, microfilm, or other copies at reasonable cost. When the researcher cannot conveniently visit the archives, the archivist will undertake to perform a reasonable amount of research — though what is reasonable is sometimes admittedly a perplexing question.

Your State archivist, just like everyone else, has to face budgetary problems. If he had unlimited funds, he could render a number of services that he cannot render with a limited appropriation and staff. Within such limitations, he is attempting to conduct a well-balanced program — to expend available funds where they will do the most good. He does not think that he has reached perfection, that he knows all the answers. He is attempting to cultivate a field that is as yet not fully explored or developed. He hopes that, as time passes and as he continues his efforts, he will be able progressively to render broader and improved services to the researcher.