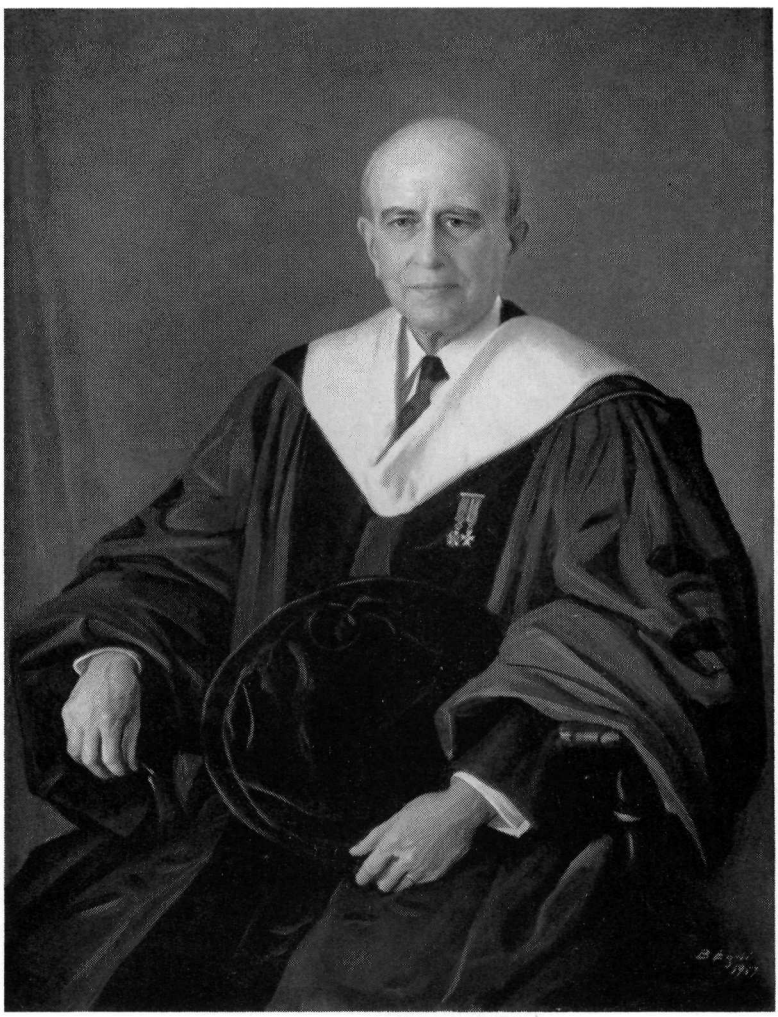

WALDO GIFFORD LELAND

Portrait by Bjorn Egeli, unveiled in the Conference Room of the National Archives on Oct. 24, 1957.

The Philadelphia Program

By CHARLES E. HUGHES, JR. [1]

Philadelphia Department of Records

ON March 20, 1700, the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania passed an act against defacers of charters, which reads as follows:

Whereas the security of titles and property, in a great measure, depends on the safety and certainty of writings and records, Be it enacted, that who soever shall forge, deface, corrupt or embezzle any charters, gifts, grants, bonds, bills, wills, conveyances or contracts, or shall deface or falsify any inrolment, registry or record, within this province shall forfeit double the value of the damage sustained thereby, one half whereof shall go to the party wronged; and the person so offending shall be discarded from all places of trust, and publicly disgraced as a false person, in the pillory, or otherwise at the discretion of the court before whom the cause shall be tried.

Again in 1705 the Council passed an act creating the office of the Register of Wills, commissioned for the probate of wills and the granting of letters of administration. This act reads in part as follows:

The holders of the office must be bonded, among other things for the delivering up the records and other writings belonging to the said office, by him, his heirs, executors or administrators, to his successors in the said office, whole and undefaced.

Through the 18th century and the early 19th century numerous laws dealing with records and recording functions were passed by the provincial councils and the assemblies of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They were good laws. They reflect intelligent concern for proper recordkeeping. Other evidence shows the scrupulous care exercised in recording, arranging, and securing the records of the City and County of Philadelphia. We have seen inventory sheets for the early 19th century, which indicate that the head of an office, at the expiration of his term, was required to furnish to his successor a detailed account of the records in his custody. Indeed, in the old days Philadelphia was a model of sound record adminis-

[1] Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Columbus, Ohio, Oct. 4, 1957. The writer is City Archivist, Department of Records, City of Philadelphia.

tration. But about 1854 the concern for records began to diminish. Evidence of this may be found in our inventories, which show great gaps of missing documents in all of the then existing departments of city and county government.

Before 1854 the County of Philadelphia included 28 boroughs, districts, and townships, in addition to the City of Philadelphia. In 1854 the State legislature passed an act consolidating all these boroughs, districts, and townships with the city. Obviously the setting up of Philadelphia's new city government involved moving the records of the several jurisdictions to a central location and resulted in some loss. Fortunately, we do have in the Municipal Archives many of the basic documents of the consolidated jurisdictions. In 1888 city departments started to move from Old City Hall, which is the Fifth and Chestnut Streets wing of the Independence Hall group of buildings, to a new City Hall in what is now Philadelphia's Penn Square. The moving of departments into the new structure was gradual and was not completed for 22 years. Although we suspect that these moves resulted in the loss of much material of great importance, not all of the fault can be charged to moving.

How far responsible people strayed from the sound practices established by Penn's government is described in Allinson and Penrose, *Philadelphia 1681-1887; a History of Municipal Development*, published in 1887, a year before the moving took place. Referring to the condition of the records, they mention

> the careless abandon with which the city of Philadelphia has left its records to survive or perish as chance or accident might dictate, the well known fact that many records were destroyed during the British Occupation, and the utter indifference heretofore manifested toward the investigation of its Municipal history and the collection and preservation of documents pertaining thereto . . . . as to the Archives and Library of the City of Philadelphia, it may almost be said that there are none, since the City does not even own a complete set of its own ordinances or journals.

This condition, of course, has been corrected. We now have in the Municipal Archives complete sets of ordinances and journals from the first issue in 1704 to the present.

In 1904 Lincoln Steffens' well-known book *The Shame of the Cities* was published, and the phrase "Philadelphia — corrupt and contented" was coined. Of the six cities covered in this work, Philadelphia was classified as the worst, without peer in the ungentle art of municipal maladministration. Its unenviable reputation extended to its records; for, in spite of a great and worthwhile research project carried out in 1901 for the American Historical Association

under the direction of the distinguished historians Herman Vandenburg Ames of the University of Pennsylvania and A. E. McKinley, nothing was done by responsible city officials to deal with the situation, a golden opportunity was lost, and the chronically bad conditions became progressively worse.

Then came what I like to call the Renaissance. It began in 1950 in the office of the city controller under the direction of Joseph S. Clark, who 2 years later was to become Philadelphia's first successful reform mayor and afterwards was elected United States Senator from Pennsylvania. As controller, Mr. Clark determined to modernize his important office. Quill pen and candlelight methods were to give way to the application of machine accounting; systematic and comprehensive audits by qualified accountants were to be made; searching analysis and proper control systems were to apply to the city's finances; the quality and morale of personnel were to be improved. In a word, the office was to be a showcase of good modern government in contrast to the inefficiency, waste, and corruption that had existed for more years than I care to mention. A wise decision was taken to improve and modernize the records of the controller's office. I had the honor to be selected for the job, although I must confess that I doubted the honor sometimes, after days in oppressively hot or excessively damp rooms laden with dust, pigeon waste, and occasional clutches of ossified pigeon eggs, when my appearance was such that I was often mistaken for the janitor.

This was the small but effective beginning of what has become known in the field of archives and record management as the Philadelphia Program. Briefly, the program in the controller's office consisted of an accurate inventory of all the records, a careful evaluation of the inventory, the lawful disposal of useless records, which represented 60 percent of the total inventory, and the finding and preservation of a large body of documents dealing mainly with the city's financial history, which are now in the Municipal Archives. We carried out a demonstration project in the application of microfilm and a modest but successful attempt at form control. Monetarily, the program brought savings of about $20,000 in the cost of space and equipment released and the proceeds from the sale of useless records as waste paper. A more important result, I think, was the effect of the program on the members of the Charter Commission, who were then drafting a new frame of government for the city. They contemplated a Department of Records that would deal with all the city's record problems. In its final form the Home Rule Charter included provisions for this new department — an innova-

tion in municipal government. The Home Rule Charter was adopted by popular vote in April 1951 and became operative on January 7, 1952. We were on our way.

The Department of Records constituted by the Home Rule Charter has full and equal status with other departments of the city government. It is headed by a commissioner, appointed by the managing director with the approval of the mayor, and two deputies appointed by the commissioner with the approval of the managing director. With the exception of the commissioner and his deputies, all departmental personnel are civil service employees.

The position of the Archivist is somewhat unique in that it is the only position in the Civil Service that is spelled out in the charter. Section 5-1101, Sub-Section (d), Part 1 reads: "Preserve all City Records not in current use and of historical, administrative, legal, research, cultural or other important value in the Archives of the City which shall be under the care and supervision of an Archivist."

At the outset, the Department of Records was organized in two divisions — the Forms Control and Records Service Division and the Archives Division. In October of 1953 the Office of the Recorder of Deeds was abolished and its functions were transferred to the Department of Records, thus broadening the scope of the department's operation and adding the Documents Division to its organization.

The early days were marked by the problems we expected to encounter in organizing a new function of government. Although it was suggested that the services of a consulting firm might be desirable, this was vetoed by those of us who believed that, if we were to be responsible for the success of the department, we should know at first hand and intimately the problems that would and did arise; and that, by drawing on our own experience and the available experience of others, the most effective results would be obtained. The total experience gained on what might be termed a do-it-yourself basis has been rewarding to us and has saved the city a considerable amount of money. Procedures were drafted; rules to implement charter provisions were approved; solicitor's opinions to clarify certain legal requirements were obtained; skilled personnel, scarce in the archival field, were carefully sought out, employed, and trained; and, perhaps most important, training classes were held for employees of the numerous departments, boards, and commissions to educate them in the meaning, purpose, and procedures of the new department.

In describing the operations of the three divisions of the depart-

ment, I should like to call your attention to the fact that each complements the other; together we deal with the control of records from creation to doomsday.

In the past, the design of forms and specifications for construction and materials were relegated to the uninformed. Control was nonexistent. As in many another vast organization whose administrative functions move on a web of forms but without an active form control program, we found a heterogeneous mass of forms compounded with overlappings, duplications, and a wasteful use of materials. The Home Rule Charter defines in a concise and unequivocal manner how forms shall be handled and places the entire control in the Department of Records. With such a firm foundation, supplemented by a few rules and the application of good management techniques, the task of erecting a sound program for the administration of forms was simplified.

Rather than attempt empire building through the employment of a large staff to examine and redesign some 7,000 different forms in use at the beginning of the program, it was decided to recruit a small but highly skilled group to analyze forms of common content used by many agencies. These forms were combined, simplified, and standardized. Where concrete savings could be realized, one-time multiple carbon sets were introduced to replace cut-sheet, manually inserted carbon. Thousands of clerical man-hours were saved by the initial effort to eliminate, combine, standardize, and simplify.

Detailed analyses were made of the quality, weight, and size of paper used. In the light of realistic retention periods and use, the heretofore uninhibited use of rag paper was brought into reasonable compass. Premium papers are now used only where long retention or unusual handling justifies them. The use of 50% rag, 24-pound paper for casual intradepartmental communications was eliminated. Odd form sizes were regularized to obtain cuts from standard commercial sizes of paper.

Almost 6 years after the form control program was introduced, the city has only a few more than 3,000 forms in active use. This total includes every possible variety — cut-sheet, continuous, specialty, tab card, envelope, ledger card, and form letter, to mention a few. These forms provide for every agency of the city and embrace all the paperwork introduced during the past 6 years to handle needed new functions.

Although the Department of Records does not install systems and procedures, the charter fortunately enjoins us to subject every form to analysis before it can be adopted. Here I might mention

that there is neither conflict nor overlapping with the method people in the using departments and agencies. Essentially in practice, form control means what it says — complete control. There is nothing of the rubber stamp about our activity.

By eliminating red tape in handling forms and by giving fast service we have established excellent rapport with the user agencies. Only by centralization can real control of forms be achieved. We have an established rule that no form can be printed by the city print shop or purchased by the Procurement Department unless it has been carefully examined for necessity, has been designed to fulfill the purpose intended, has been constructed and designed for the type of writing machine used, and has been printed by the method best suited to the details of its design.

The entire program of paperwork control is being carried out by a staff of only 8 people. This staff examines, analyzes, designs, composes, rules, writes specifications, maintains files, and performs all related clerical functions. In ratio to the total number of city employees, there is 1 form control employee for every 3,500. Annual savings run into tens of thousands of dollars.

Records Service, which is an activity combined with Forms Control, plays a major role in the management of city records. It embraces the administrative analysis of records. You may ask, why is such a function necessary or justified? During the past two decades the growth of paperwork in industry and government has mushroomed tremendously. Some have characterized record creation and accumulation as a curse. I do not know that the word "curse" is descriptive, but I submit that the growth of records, left unattended and improperly managed, will like a cancer cause serious problems in administrative services and will waste valuable man-hours and space that today is at a premium.

The service we perform in record management embraces every facet from the provision of equipment tailored to a particular body of records to the development of methods for charging out records. Indexing, cross-referencing, microfilming, and all other techniques are recommended only after detailed study. We have made extensive use of microfilm both for the preservation of vital records and for the administrative use of records. Judiciously applied, microfilm can save space, reduce costs, arrest deterioration, and give security. But microfilm can be expensive and wasteful if the records filmed are not carefully analyzed. I suspect that, in recent years, war scares and the awesome threat of nuclear weapons have resulted in the useless expenditure of large sums of money for

microfilming records of no lasting value. But wherever film can be used administratively and the records must be kept indefinitely, microfilming pays off.

We have microfilmed all our property deeds — over 17,000 books averaging 600 pages per book and going back to 1682 — and have inserted sections of the film into acetate jackets for viewing. We are now microfilming mortgages. We have conserved several thousand square feet of space and are saving annually some $27,000 in clerical and material costs on the deeds alone. What is so very important to us is that we have recovered enough space to take care of 25 years' expansion and still provide enough room for a new operation we were recently called upon to administer. Before this microfilming, we had virtually no unused space and had to disperse records over three floors.

Now let me present an actual case in the operation of our Records Service, which we completed last July — a "first" in municipal record management and one in which I think we may justly take pride.

We have a body of records in Philadelphia constituting the Registry Division, dating back to 1865. The Registry Division was part of our Department of Streets; but, because it deals in the main with real estate transfer records, it was moved by ordinance from the Department of Streets to the Documents Division of the Department of Records in January of this year. Every time a deed was recorded an abstract was made reciting the new owner, former owner, date, and description of the metes and bounds or the exact geographical location of the property in respect to streets. The dimensions are actually plotted to scale on plats. There are some 5,000 plats representing segments of the city. The abstracts occupied some 270 4-drawer file cabinets and numbered 4½ million sheets of paper in file. The 5,000 plats and about 40,000 transfer sheets, on which the new name was posted chronologically upon each transfer of title, were in 419 huge metal-bound books. Each year over 40,000 entries were made and 40,000 sheets or abstracts filed.

These records were in a deplorable condition; through neglect and hard use — 140,000 references annually — one of the most valuable groups of records in city government had deteriorated sadly. The little recopying that could be done was a virtual treadmill of wasted effort. What did we do with this gargantuan body of records? First we assigned a crew of highly competent record people — our own, incidentally — to examine every detail of the operation.

Our record examiners first arranged to microfilm the 4½ million abstracts and put the film of the abstracts pertaining to each proper-

ty in an acetate jacket allowing room for future additions. Secondly, abstracting was discontinued. The microfilmed deed now serves as the abstract. Thirdly, we eliminated posting to transfer sheets. What did we accomplish, what did it cost, what did we save?

1. We eliminated transfer sheets and abstracting.
2. We eliminated the keeping, handling, and replacing of bulky heavy binders.
3. We arrested the deterioration of the records.
4. We provided a duplicate copy of the entire record on film as insurance against fire, water damage, pilferage, or any catastrophe.
5. We reduced the number of 4-drawer cabinets needed for these records from 270 to 31.
6. We made a net recovery of 2,200 square feet of space.
7. We have enough expansion room in the 31 cabinets for 10 additional years of records.
8. This entire installation cost only $90,000, including the cost of all initial microfilming (with security copies), cabinets, readers, furniture, and so forth.

Our recurring clerical savings from this operation are $26,000 annually; floor space, $6,600 annually; forms and binders, $1,000 annually. The used cabinets we freed are worth $6,400. We now have a record installation that will pay for itself in concrete savings in less than 4 years and will provide for future needs with security assured. This is a result of sound record analysis and the judicious use of microfilm.

The Documents Division performs all the services rendered by the former Office of the Recorder of Deeds. Deeds, mortgages, and miscellaneous papers are recorded here for a fee. The division is the source of information needed in title searching and other activities concerned with the transfer of real property. The growth of installment buying has increased the demand for services supplied by this division. It is a beehive of activity every day of the week. Besides lawyers, credit investigators, and private inquirers, there is a daily stream of title searchers employed by Philadelphia's numerous title companies, working with deeds, mortgages, and registry records. It may be of interest to note a few of the services rendered by this division in a 4-week period: 9,200 papers recorded, 3,149 transfers plotted, 6,904 examinations of plan books by officials and the public, and 505 copies of reports on traffic accidents sold.

The project for microfilming the deeds was started in 1949 and originally was planned for security purposes only. Playing an im-

portant part in the Renaissance, the Documents Division, after intelligent analysis, developed the program to the point of using the film administratively with the resultant savings mentioned above. The daily production of microfilm rolls has increased over 1,000 percent since 1949, and a comparable improvement in the quality of the work done is apparent.

In 1953 a routine investigation of the records of the Police Department indicated that traffic-accident reports, for which there is a great demand, were available for reference in at least three dispersed locations of the city government. The Traffic Engineering Division of the Department of Streets was carrying a heavy burden of supplying copies of them to lawyers and insurance investigators, without a fee. The Accident Investigation Division of the Police Department was furnishing copies, for a fee. Copies were available at other points, under no supervision at all. We centralized this service in the Documents Division, thus relieving the Streets and Police Departments of work foreign to their purposes, improved the service to the public, and collected fees that total annually about $25,000. The goal we have set for the Documents Division, and I think it is contemplated in the charter, is that some day it will have all the records of all the departments, boards, and commissions that would be practical to keep, and will service public requirements from a central location. The total fees collected by this division in 1956 were $567,671. Of this amount, $51,203 was turned over to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as its share of recording taxes collected.

The Archives Division is the direct responsibility of the City Archivist. The functions of the division govern retention and disposal programs, the operation of the record center, and the Municipal Archives. The monumental task of a citywide inventory of records was the first project carried out by the Department of Records. A total of 200,000 cubic feet of records was counted and evaluated. The initial disposal of useless records was made in September 1952, and disposals have been made regularly since that time. The division has now removed and destroyed over half of the original inventory in addition to keeping abreast of current accumulations. The values realized to date from disposals total $375,000 from the conservation of space and equipment and the sale of useless records (as waste paper) and of other salvageable material. Aside from the contribution the inventory has made to our disposal programs, it is constantly used as a guide in our current work.

The courts in Philadelphia are not under the City Charter and are

not subject to the authority and regulations of the Department of Records. The city is, however, required to furnish space and equipment to the courts. The largest body of records in a single agency are the records of our courts of common pleas, under the direct supervision of the prothonotary or clerk of the courts. I estimate their inventory, not included in our inventory, at something over 50,000 cubic feet, stored in dispersed locations all through City Hall. Should nothing be done, these records would occupy nearly all of City Hall in another 10 or 15 years. We approached the problem by calling the attention of the prothonotary, who was constantly asking for additional space, to the impossible situation facing him unless some modern plan should be applied at once. On our own account we reviewed the laws of several States dealing with court records and recommended that legislation sponsored by the courts be presented to the State Assembly for adoption. Last year an act was passed permitting the courts to apply modern methods to their record problems. Projects are now being worked out by our record management people, and we expect that this unwieldy problem will be reduced to manageable proportions within the next few years. We have been invited in the past to service the records of our municipal and criminal courts and have welcomed the opportunity to do so. In such cases the provisions of State law are applied when disposals are made.

Records made headlines in our local papers in July of this year, when it was reported that many of our historic wills had been stolen and sold to a manuscript collector. The wills are in the custody of the register of wills, who is ex officio clerk of the Orphans Court and not under our jurisdiction. As a result of the thefts, we were invited by the president judge of the Orphans Court to survey the records of the register and make recommendations to the court for the proper care, security, and use of this vitally important body of historical documents. Our findings were shocking. Over half of the original wills for the period 1730-1850 are missing. A check of security, housing, filing, atmosphere, and all factors considered essential in record administration disclosed that the wills were kept under deplorable conditions. Our report included recommendations for immediate corrective measures and the transfer of the wills, letters of administration, and related papers for the period 1683-1900 to the Municipal Archives. We fervently hope that the board of the Orphans Court judges will approve our recommendations. The requests for our services by agencies not under the charter have been not only helpful in dealing with the overall problem of records

but most encouraging to us — and a pretty good indication that we know our business.

To our record center we channel those classes of records that have infrequent reference requirements and long-term or permanent retention periods. We have developed an effective system of control, which is analyzed periodically to determine the precise reference value of each body of records held in the center. We are now in a position to tell departments the exact rate of use of their records instead of depending on hit-or-miss estimates or on memory, which is too often faulty where records are concerned. This definite information is a key to precise record disposals, and when coupled with other considerations, leads to a most exact and guarded system for the disposal of useless records.

Some of you are familiar with our publication, *A Guide to the Municipal Archives*, which is another Philadelphia "first." The *Guide*, published last May, lists our holdings of historical collections. We were honored when Roy Nichols of the University of Pennsylvania agreed to write the foreword to this publication. I mention the *Guide* because a brief comment on a few of our collections is all that space will permit here.

The 1701 Charter, bearing William Penn's signature, has been returned to the city by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The society fortunately had custody of this priceless document for many years when the city had no interest in giving it proper care. It has been processed for preservation and is now mounted in suitable dignity as a permanent exhibit in the reception room of the mayor.

The deeds in chain of title leading to the purchase of Independence Square and its historic buildings by the City of Philadelphia from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on June 29, 1818, were found — some 148 paper and parchment documents, dating back to 1682. All have been properly processed, indexed, and filed in a secure modern cabinet. The records of the surveyor general, beginning with the first survey made by Thomas Holme in 1682 and including land surveys up to 1752, were found in makeshift bindings and badly dried out by years of storage against a steam radiator. These have been laminated with new binding strips and will be suitably bound upon completion of an indexing project now being carried on. This group of records discloses a part of the history of Philadelphia unknown before our review. The indexes are so well planned that I am certain that searchers, and in particular genealogists, will be delighted with the easy access provided to the contents of the volumes.

Our collection of naturalization and immigration records is not only useful to research scholars and historians but is also called for regularly by the Federal Bureau of Immigration and other agencies of government.

Our experience in the field of public relations has been gratifying. We are on the best of terms with our universities and colleges. We have the solid moral support of our several historical societies and agencies. The press has been generous in allotting space to newsworthy items. Business establishments, particularly the large banks in the heart of our city, have made their spacious lobbies and display windows available for periodic exhibits. For 18 months, the facilities of our educational radio station, WHYY, were used for a weekly program, "Historically Yours," carried on by the Archivist. This station is now venturing into the field of television, and we expect to do some programs periodically. The effect of all this has been to educate our citizens in the meaning of this new function of their city government and, I think, to give them assurance that the records are now receiving care and attention commensurate with their importance.

Much has been accomplished in a relatively short period; much remains to be done. The knotty problem of funds is and perhaps always will be with us. If, however, we are not to stunt our natural growth; if we are to meet the ever increasing demands for our services; if we are to have adequate space, personnel, and equipment badly needed now — we must have a more generous attitude on the part of our appropriating body. And if I am permitted to dream for a moment, I shall dream of a program that would be a modern version of the care for our records that marked the government of William Penn when his "Greene Countrie Towne" was young. Today, in Philadelphia, I think we are approaching the fulfillment of that dream.