

The California State Archives

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California State Archives

THE first law enacted by the first session of the California State Legislature, sitting in San Jose in 1849-50, was "An Act concerning the public archives." For 109 years now there has been an Archives at the California State capital. What has been the nature of this agency over the years? What records does it now hold? What, from the point of view of the professional historian, are its resources? The remarks that follow attempt to answer these questions, at least in part.

The institutional history of the California State Archives has much relevance to an understanding of its resources. Knowledge of this history is a basic instrument for the researcher in determining the probable relevance of the Archives' holdings to his interests and, once research in the Archives has begun, in going more surely to the materials sought. The situation will perhaps become clearer when it is pointed out that in the California State Archives the apparatus of published guides and inventories is very little developed. The past practices of the various State agencies in the keeping and disposition of their records, and the relation of the agencies to the State Archives over the years, pretty largely explain what records are available, and what are not, in the Archives today.

The "Act concerning the public archives," approved on January 5, 1850, reads in part as follows:

Sec. 1. That the Secretary of State be and is hereby instructed to call upon, ask and receive, of the late Secretary of the State of California, all public records, registers, maps, books, papers, rolls, documents, and other writings, which he may have in his possession, which appertain to, or are in any wise connected with the political, civil, and military history, and past administration of the Government in California; the titles to bonds within the territory, or to any other subject which may be interesting, or valuable as references or authorities to the Government, or people of the State. And that the Secretary of State be directed to classify, and safely keep, and preserve the same, in his office.

The State constitution adopted the preceding November pro-

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association in San Francisco, Dec. 27, 1957. The statistics cited have been revised to Jan. 1959. The writer is Historian, California State Archives.

vided that the secretary of state "shall keep a fair record of the official acts of the legislative and executive departments of the government."

From the beginning, then, the Archives has had the dual assignment of (1) preserving records accumulated by the Office of the Secretary of State and (2) preserving records of enduring value created by other governmental offices. The records of the secretary of state have come down through the years almost intact, but the records of other agencies have had a very different history.

It was in 1869 that the State offices began to move into the present State Capitol, and apparently most of the next two decades passed before a serious record storage problem arose. Whatever the reason, in 1880 Secretary of State William C. Hendricks first advanced the idea of establishing a true interagency archives, a central storage facility for the archives of all the offices in the Capitol. He described archival records honestly as "those which are rarely referred to, yet valuable, and have become cumbersome."

With an alacrity that nowadays would be incredible, the State Legislature the next year passed "An Act to provide for fitting up in the basement of the Capitol building a moisture-proof, fire-proof, and burglar-proof vault for storage and care of the archives of the State offices, for the appointment of a Keeper of the Archives, defining his duties . . .," and so forth.

This vault, "fitted up with a view to the requirements for space of all the various State offices," the secretary of state opened to use in 1891. As part of room 12 in the Capitol basement, it still serves the Archives. The transfer of records under this early archives and record-center program was brisk, so brisk that by 1898 the basement vault, as well as a second vault on the first floor, had been filled. Thereafter records piled up in the respective offices as in earlier times, to be moved into whatever out-of-the-way space could be found or to be destroyed outright.

The slackening, after the turn of the century, of the practice of centralizing archival material and the consequent rise in the agencies of loosely controlled record retention and disposition practices explain many of the present *lacunae* in the records of the post-1900 period. But owing to the act of 1889 a substantial body of records of the first half century of the State's existence was safeguarded for future use.

During the 1920's and 1930's a number of agencies again looked to the Archives for a way out of their record storage problems. For example, in 1928 the State controller handed over his file of

inactive claim schedules, in volume the equivalent of 13,000 letter-file drawers of records. The secretary of state found it necessary to take over two floors of the State warehouse on R Street to keep up with the tide. Faced with inundation by what today would be classified as record-center or noncurrent records, the secretary of state in 1939 secured a revision of the 1889 act, which permitted him to receive in the Archives only records deemed by him to have historical value. The problem of storing noncurrent, nonarchival materials was covered by legislation, enacted in 1947, enabling the secretary of state to establish an out-and-out record center. This low-cost storage and service facility, where an agency can keep its less active files, is now being used by some 45 State agencies.

From an archival point of view the problem of providing adequate housing for records is matched by the problem of protecting archival interests in the operation of agency record-destruction programs. Throughout most of California's history permanently valuable records have been thrown out with the valueless. For three-quarters of a century each department of the State government destroyed or disposed of its noncurrent records solely in accordance with its own requirements and interests, without question or review elsewhere. The first provision for a routine extra-agency check of records proposed for destruction came in 1927, not as an expression of archival interest but because the Department of Finance had found that records were being destroyed before they could be audited. Thereafter approval by the Department of Finance was required before records could be destroyed. All subsequent policies on record review rest on the 1927 law.

In the late 1940's the secretary of state and the Department of Finance jointly developed an effective program for the review of records proposed for destruction. The basic procedures may be briefly noted. They are outlined in the *Legislative Orientation Conference* (Sacramento, 1958):

When an agency has a quantity of records that have served their purpose and are no longer required in the performance of duty, the agency enters on a simplified form a request for authorization to destroy these records. The request is forwarded to the Department of Finance for review by the Division of Audits and then sent on to the Secretary of State for a check by the Archives, after which the form is returned to the originating office with specific instructions entered on it. In the process Audits and the Archives have indicated what their interests are. Audits may strike certain items from the list or may approve witnessed or unwitnessed destruction of the records. The Archives may request that some or all of the records be transferred to the Archives or held until the Historian can visit the office to screen them, or, if none of the records merit permanent retention, approve their total destruction.

In this way basic fiscal and archival interests are protected. Since March 1949, when the present plan began to function, 3,004 requests for record destruction have been processed, involving approximately 4,700 tons of records. Considerably less than 1 percent of this material has been retained for archival purposes; most of the remainder has been sold as wastepaper.

The screening or appraisal of noncurrent records for archival material is done by the Archives historian. This point requires a little elaboration, for additions to the resources of the Archives today depend primarily on this program. Two classes of value are considered in the selection of records for permanent retention: evidential value and more broadly informational value. The former value relates to the documentation of organization, functions, and operations of the office that created the records. The latter value has to do with the unique, significant, and usable information the records contain about the persons, places, conditions, or things with which the agency dealt. The appraiser must take note of the whole range of interest among users of the records. These users include, besides the various government branches and agencies, historians, political scientists, geographers, economists, statisticians, architects, engineers, genealogists, university students, general researchers, and authors in many fields. The Archives aspires to serve the broadest possible range of legitimate interests, both now and in the future.

In considering the present contents of the Archives a number of generalizations should first be made:

1. The California State Archives is part of an integrated agency within the Office of the Secretary of State known as the Archives and Central Record Depository. Both parts of the agency are located in the Archives Building, at 1020 O Street, Sacramento; and for the most part both are managed by the same staff. The Archives of course concerns itself with records of enduring reference and research value, the record center with noncurrent agency files. Of the 72,000 cubic feet of records now housed in the Archives Building, by far the larger part consists of record-center material.

2. The holdings of the State Archives are almost entirely confined to records created or accumulated by the agencies of the California State government. (The principal exceptions are the court records of Sacramento County for the period 1849-79, copies of the Spanish-Mexican land grant papers, and the papers of a few California Congressmen.) The Archives does not collect materials on California history generally. The California section of the State Library is the governmental agency operating in that area.

3. The Archives as a rule receives only unpublished manuscript records of the State agencies. The government publication section of the State Library collects published items.

4. The State Archives does not contain all the archival material of the State government. Many if not most of the State agencies maintain agency archives of a sort. The holdings of a few of them, such as those of the Department of Water Resources, are quite extensive; and the researcher in their fields of operation will perhaps find more to interest him there than in the State Archives.

The quiet recesses and privileged files here and there in the agencies no doubt contain a good many records that might well be in the State Archives. Not long ago, for example, the tower of the Ferry Building in San Francisco yielded up several hundred cubic feet of Port of San Francisco records extending all the way back to 1863, when the State began to manage the *embarcadero*. Just recently the Department of Education's great file of annual reports has come to the Archives. These "Common School Reports," initiated by John Swett in the 1860's, contain detailed data on the State's public school system down to the district and individual schoolhouse, supplied by the county superintendents.

Thus, under the California system an agency may hold records of permanent interest as long as it wishes. The situation will suggest that the work of the Archives includes interagency promotion of its program.

5. A catalog of records not to be found in the Archives would certainly note that there is no *Congressional Record* for the California Legislature, either in printed or in manuscript form. The printed *Journals* of each house, to be sure, give the chronology of proceedings: but aside from the coverage by the press, which grows more general and discursive every session, no record of the debates and discourses of the members is preserved. Legislative committee files, moreover, do not ordinarily reach the Archives. Their disposition is subject to the pleasure of the committee chairmen; their status is that of any other material in the legislators' files.

What, then, does the Archives contain? I am obliged to continue in the negative vein and say that there is no *Guide to the Records in the State Archives* that can be held up in answer to that question. The usual excuse must be made: The work of safeguarding archival materials — of finding them, salvaging them, and providing secure housing for them — has left little time to accomplish much more.

For the only detailed list of archival materials generally available it is necessary to go back to 1915. The *Annual Report* of the

American Historical Association for that year contains a 30-page "Report on the Archives of the State of California," by E. L. Head, then Keeper of the Archives. Brief statements on the holdings of the Archives have appeared from time to time, but Head's report is apparently the most detailed work of this nature ever to appear in print. Finding aids within the Archives are somewhat more detailed. Several massive volumes of indexes were compiled in manuscript by the W. P. A., and a number of card indexes to individual collections have been made. But far too much of the system of control depends on the unrecorded knowledge of the staff.

The materials in the State Archives are organized into record groups. Each record group consists of records of a single department or of an independent agency and is broken into series and sub-series conforming to the divisions and bureaus within the department. A few examples may suffice to indicate the organization and scope of the holdings.

The secretary of state's record group includes three large series:

1. The legislative file contains the original statutes, the original journals, petitions to the Legislature, miscellaneous papers, and all bills handed up to the desk. Bills not enacted into law, which make up the greater part of the file, often contain information not to be found elsewhere.
2. A second large series is the election series. Here is the master file on the returns of the State's elections, beginning with the election of August 1849 to fill the local offices and to choose delegates to the Monterey Convention and coming on down to the present. Because the statistics are broken down by precinct, they have values — for example as indices of population — that go beyond information on political events alone.
3. The corporation series in the secretary of state's record group forms another massive collection. Consisting of articles of association and incorporation, it obviously throws light on many aspects of California's economic, political, and social history.

The State Supreme Court record group is another very large body of material, containing the extant case records of the San Francisco and Los Angeles court offices dating from the State's earliest years. From a historical point of view it is one of the most valuable record groups in the Archives. The court records of Sacramento County, from 1849 to 1879, are also on deposit in the Archives. As a commercial center in the days when the miner was king, Sacramento was second only to San Francisco in the State. The voluminous manuscript material submitted as evidence in pioneer

court proceedings makes this collection a valuable source of information about many aspects of the society of the period.

The Governor's record group contains a variety of materials, including executive appointment books, proclamations, pardons, reprieves, commutations, and many letter books of nineteenth-century governors. The papers of Governor Warren, for the period 1939-53, under seal until 1963, total 600 cubic feet.

The adjutant general's records and the file known as the Indian War papers are rich in California military history. The Public Utilities Commission's records contain much material on the State's economic growth, particularly as regards transportation and hydro-electric development. The social welfare record group documents the evolution of government programs in California in that field.

Respecting accessions under the current screening program, it should be noted that a good deal of attention is given to the files of correspondence that come up for disposition. Correspondence files reveal the interpretations and attitudes and immediate thinking of the men and women who carry out the duties of office and of the elements of the public with whom they deal. Here the government and the individual citizen meet; here agency talks to agency. Here is material often not to be found in published form. Here are records for the Archives.

The phrase "resources of the State archives" fairly embraces, I believe, the various factors that bear on their efficient use. Mention has been made of the importance of some familiarity with the institution's history. A more fundamental key to the State archives, however, is the researcher's knowledge of the relation of his subject to governmental action. He should consider first the following questions: "Did the subject ever come within the province of State governmental action?" If so, "What office was involved?" And since archival materials are rarely filed by subject, being kept instead as the agencies maintained them for administrative use, an understanding of the past organization and functions of the relevant offices is very helpful. Useful in this connection are the Hurt and Ferina *Outlines of the Administrative Organization of the California State Government*, the annual and biennial reports of State agencies, and the California State *Blue Books*.

The relation of research subjects to State agency activities fixes the definite limits of the State Archives as a research center. It should be remembered, however, that the State government touches society and the lives of the people in so many different ways that its records often have a surprising range and depth of interest.

Finally, how do the resources of a government archives fit into the world of the professional historian? Professional historians may think of an archives as existing for their sake alone. But a public archives, aside from its primary work as a service agency for the government of which it is a part, serves all kinds of people. For every professional historian coming in, you have a dozen amateurs. There are lawyers and business men and genealogists, and people from distant places who call in quest of a single and, perhaps to anybody else, a trifling fact.

It seems to me that an archives by and large is not for writers of our general histories or for the impressionists or for others who deal in subjects and fields in the large. Such writers cannot ordinarily do much profitable research in the sources. An archives is primarily for the specialist, upon whose labors general writers depend. Fine work, laborious work, tedious work is what archives demand. But it is just this sort of work, the painstaking work of ascertaining detailed facts, that should distinguish basic historical research.

An assumption predicated on a surmise derived from a conjecture based on unauthenticated evidence may be history as one man sees it and, if he is given a platform, history as many see it. But granting that we are not disciples of the hunch and intuition school, the point that needs making is that the guesswork that passes for history, even in works of eminent writers, would be lessened if the pick and the shovel were accorded better standing in the profession. History depends on basic research, and all its other functions — narration, interpretation, analysis, synthesis — derive their validity from this first step. An archives is the place where much of the basic research has to be done.