

# Use of Local Archives in the Study of Local History

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**S**INCE I have had no training as an archivist, librarian, or curator of manuscripts, project director or editor of a journal, and since I am not even a member of a board of directors of any archival or historical organization, you may feel that I am out of place here. I am strictly a layman — a novice. But that is precisely why I am here, if I interpret my assignment correctly. I think our chairman selected me to speak because he had been led to believe that I had had considerable experience in the actual use of the facilities that have been described here this morning. So my remarks will be personal and informal, concerning my own experiences and some of the problems I have encountered in my research.

As this is a joint session of the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History, I shall not limit my remarks to strictly archival matters. Both organizations are concerned with collecting and preserving materials of historical value. But I suspect that there may be some differences of opinion as to what constitutes archival material and what does not. As a researcher I am not concerned with technical definitions and differentiations. Whether an item should be classified as archival material or library material or whether it should belong to a historical collection — private or public — does not matter very much to me.<sup>1</sup> What I want is access to documents, source materials, information — regardless of what they are called or where they are. I hope to be able to find these materials as easily as possible and in a usable condition. I hope to find not only the source materials but also adequate space in which to work — with good light, a table, and a typewriter if possible. If microfilm is involved, there should be plenty of reading machines, such as one finds in the Church

\* Paper read on Aug. 20, 1958, at a joint session of the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History, at Salt Lake City, Utah. The author is professor of history at the University of Utah.

<sup>1</sup> By this I do not mean to discourage current efforts to enlarge and expand the public archives. On the contrary, the more nearly complete the public collections are the better.

Historian's Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In addition to the documents and mechanical equipment I hope to find cheerful, qualified attendants, ready, willing, and anxious to help. In listing these items I do not mean to imply a general lack of them, for I have usually been given most cordial and helpful treatment. I wish to compliment the staffs of all the organizations with which I have come in contact.

I am thoroughly convinced of the importance of studying and writing State and local history and have been associated with a few such projects in our own area. The more I delve into local subjects, the more I realize how fertile the field is. In my studies I have become acquainted with some of the local and regional depositories of source materials and have found them indispensable.

Those of us who have done research in the history of the Inter-Mountain West are impressed with the important role of the Mormon Church in that history and with the absolute necessity of becoming acquainted with the Church Historian's Library. For Mormon settlements were not confined to Utah; they extended into Idaho, Nevada, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. A study of these areas will inevitably lead to the church archives. The church records not only contain accounts of incidents associated with the religious aspects of the founding of colonies but also contain important documents bearing on government and economic conditions. For the church activity was closely enmeshed in the economic institutions, and there was virtually no separation between church and state in some of the settlements. The church developed a unique colonization program, which was a major influence in the settlement of the West. I have just completed a study of one such colonizing venture, the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition of the San Juan Mission.<sup>2</sup> This study has taken me into the Church Historian's Library quite regularly during the past half-dozen years, and there I have received complete cooperation. Official church records, minutes of meetings, letters, diaries, and journals have all been made available. It is true that the church does exercise some restricting control over the use and publication of private journals deposited in its archives. But I have never been denied the use of any material there; and without church cooperation I could not have gone far in my study.

I do not mean to imply that the church has been my only source of assistance. The files of the Utah State Historical Society and of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers and private archives of families have

<sup>2</sup> See David E. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock; an Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1959).

all been made available. I have found that individuals as well as institutions are usually willing to cooperate in any worthy undertaking.

A researcher usually goes to the archives looking for specific material — not just as a sightseer. He first wants to know if there is any available material pertaining to his problem. This may not always be easy to determine because filing systems are not always consistent. As a result it is sometimes difficult to find material that is actually on file. The researcher hopes to find reference cards dealing with the general subject he is pursuing, plus additional cards for subdivisions of his subject. He hopes to find any special or peculiar information pertinent to the subject listed on separate cards.

A general information card or a brief historical sketch of a subject prepared by the archivist is often of great value. Let me cite an example. If I were undertaking a study of the Utah Land Board it would be of great value to me to see a brief historical outline right at the beginning of my study. This outline would show that the Land Board had passed through various phases of development both in its personnel and in its functions and control. It was first created by legislative action as a separate and more or less independent agency, with members appointed by the Governor subject to senate confirmation. Nearly a decade later the law was amended to include the Governor as a member of the board. For 7 years this situation prevailed. A third reorganization then placed the Land Board under the jurisdiction of the Finance Commission, where it remained for 17 years. Then, in 1957, it was again given independent status. Obviously such a sketch would enable me to understand and evaluate materials I might find for any particular period of the board's activity. During the era of gubernatorial membership, for example, with possible gubernatorial domination, it would be necessary to study the Governor's communications and activities as well as the official minutes of the Land Board. The era of Finance Commission control would also lead to a broader study outside the Land Board minutes. Making such historical sketches may be too much to ask of already busy archivists, but it would certainly be a help to researchers. Utah's State Archivist is undertaking such a program at the present time.

Official papers of the governors of States are usually on file in the State Archives, but much important information could be obtained from the private letters and papers of the governors if they also were deposited there. How to obtain such private papers, of course, becomes a problem, for families are often reluctant to turn such materials over to the State. Efforts should be made, however, to ac-

quire the personal papers of governors and of other officials and prominent men and women.

One rather noticeable weakness I have found in my work is the lack of adequate map collections. Try, for example, to find an accurate map of Salt Lake City before 1860. Yes, there are some to be found in the city archives, but they are extremely rare. The Church Historian's Library has a fair map collection. The University of Utah Engineering Library is making good progress in developing its map file, which is already the best in this area. Archivists and historical societies should be encouraged to collect maps.

What I have said about maps is doubly true regarding photographs — not only of people but of buildings, road projects, and other objects. There may be some difference of opinion regarding the importance of pictures, but I find them most valuable and not very plentiful. The Pioneer Village of the Sons of Utah Pioneers has acquired a collection of 50,000 Charles R. Savage negatives and plates and other photographic material; but no one has yet found time to examine and classify it. It has real value. The Utah State Historical Society has recently acquired a rather extensive personal photographic collection from Nicholas G. Morgan, Sr., to add to its growing collection, which has also been enhanced by a file prepared by officers of the Utah State Road Commission. When properly cataloged, this collection will be of great value to researchers. The Daughters of Utah Pioneers has a growing photograph collection. Such photograph collections should be supported by darkroom facilities — equipment for copying and enlarging to provide prints at moderate cost. Speaking of copying leads me to point out the importance of having access to a photostat outfit or some other means of duplication whereby a researcher may obtain copies of maps and other documents at reasonable cost. Where such equipment is not now available it should be added.

I know that archivists, librarians, curators, and others responsible for collecting, storing, and cataloging materials are constantly busy trying to fill in the blank spaces — to make their record holdings as nearly complete as possible. I wish to encourage them in this and to congratulate them on the progress already made.

I should also like to encourage historical societies and other organizations such as the Sons and Daughters of Utah Pioneers in collecting and displaying museum materials, which are also source material. These organizations should also continue their work of identifying and accurately marking historic sites. Utah has several unmarked or mismarked important sites; other States are doubtless in the same predicament.

In closing this brief report I should like to emphasize the importance of fieldwork in history, especially here in the West, where so many important sites remain virtually unaltered. A trip into the Great Salt Lake Desert, where the century-old wagon tracks are still clearly visible and the desert mud is still mighty sticky, will certainly enable one to appreciate the trials of the Donner party and others who used the Hastings Cutoff. No one can really appreciate the difficulties and achievements of the Domínguez-Escalante expedition of 1776 in the Glen Canyon region without actually retracing the route through that desolate but spectacular country to the Crossing of the Fathers. Visit the site of the Golden Spike, and examine the parallel roadbeds built by rival railroad companies. Paddle to Frémont Island in Great Salt Lake, climb to the summit, and relax on the spot where the "Pathfinder" sat as he surveyed the lake with his spyglass, while Kit Carson in the shade of a nearby rock "carved a huge cross which is there to this day." But don't hunt for Frémont's lost spyglass cap — you won't find it.

Yes, go to the archives, get the record and document the facts; then hit the trail and really study, appreciate, and write local history!

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