

Surveying for Archives Buildings

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TOO OFTEN an archival survey is thought of in terms of measuring over-age records in attics and basements and crowded file rooms, of computing totals in cubic feet for the use of an architect who supposedly can employ such hastily gathered data in designing a structure suitable to house and service records. This conception of surveying is deceptively simple and inadequate. A survey on which the planning of an archives building is to be based must cover much more than merely the gross bulk of records.

For among the least useful of surveys is that of gross records bulk. As one who in earlier days attempted surveys of bulky records dispersed in inadequate storage places, I can testify to the basic futility of the process. Armed with a somewhat complicated questionnaire, a yardstick, and a measuring tape, we plunged into our task. What we found astounded even ourselves. The adding machines, honest beyond question, demonstrated that the records in and about our National Capital, placed end to end, would reach an obscure point in the Orient. Placed in filing cabinets one atop the other, they would quickly mount beyond the top of the Empire State Building and enter zones recently rendered hazardous by Sputniks, Explorers, and similar vehicles of ultrarapid transit. This makes good propaganda, but even as propaganda it has become stale. Certainly there exist vast quantities of records, but measurements of gross bulk have no significance unless supplemented by an estimate of substantive content. What information do the records contain? Is their preservation essential? If so, for how long?

There can be no doubt that, in its day, propaganda regarding records bulk served a purpose. It overcame inertia, made possible the expansion of staff in some State archives, helped to launch programs for microfilming, and promoted the establishment of procedures for regulating and fostering the destruction of that great percentage of public records whose life span should be brief. Some of the surveys of gross bulk were primitive, but they were a definite

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stage in archival evolution. Some governments, with or without surveys, went on to establish carefully planned programs of micro-filming for space conservation and to set up systems for controlled disposal of records adjudged useless. Storage areas have become somewhat cleared for still further advance.

It is notable that the most conspicuous of the modern surveys do not appear to have been made primarily to obtain data on which to plan a records building; rather they were aimed at better control of records. At our meeting in Washington in 1956 Thornton Mitchell reported on the survey he was then conducting in Illinois, and Vernon Santen on his survey of the records of the State of New York. Both reports have been published in the *American Archivist*.¹ Mr. Mitchell and his National Records Management Council staff had profited from experience at the National Archives and elsewhere, and Mr. Santen has for over a decade coped with New York's records problems. In the background at Illinois was the long and devoted career of Margaret Norton, and behind the Albany survey lay years of regulated disposition by a succession of archivists. Such modern surveys, solidly based and thoroughly planned, are quite capable of furnishing reliable data useful either for expanding a program of regulated disposition or for planning a new building. If money and skilled archivists are available, the survey may well be a logical step in development of any local program for records care.

A survey merely of records bulk is so unreliable and a scientific survey is so expensive and ponderous, however, that much can be said for skipping the survey and proceeding merely to estimate records bulk and thus obtain a basis for planning. In Pennsylvania we never have had a staff sufficiently large and able to do more than search out and preserve archival treasures while encouraging and guarding disposition, but in carrying on those essential chores we have reached certain conclusions that we believe to be sound.

Our basic assumption is that the volume of records accumulated by a government will vary directly with the size of the population involved and with the age of the government itself. Pennsylvania is older than the Union and has always been populous. Through the years its population has approximated a tenth of the nation's. The Federal archives very quickly filled the million cubic feet of space that became available 25 years ago in Washington. We feel that Pennsylvania would be extremely shortsighted to plan for less than

¹ "The Illinois Records Management Survey," in *American Archivist*, 20:119-130 (Apr. 1957); and "The New York State Inventory Project," *ibid.*, 20:357-367 (Oct. 1957).

100,000 cubic feet of space for its records. Many variables are involved, but to a degree these tend to balance each other, and we believe our estimate to be as close to reality as would the figures supplied by a survey that measured records to the nearest foot.

We also feel that, like most State archives, we must have a location close to the capitol and handy for State officials, scholars, and others who need to come for consultation or service. On Harrisburg's Capitol Square a building attractive in appearance is essential. A sprawling warehouse, however inexpensive and utilitarian, would hardly be tolerated. In our case, the adjacent Susquehanna River limits the depth to which we can sink storage areas. Faced with our situation we are planning a high building, with ample office quarters and working space, providing a section for permanent archives together with a section for transient materials. Thus we shall attempt to combine an archival agency and a records center.

Of course we are asking for offices, a search room, a photographic section, and workrooms for sorting and repair; but the core of the building will be the space for records. We may be able to get 100,000 cubic feet, and certainly we cannot justify a request for less. We must have centrally located quarters for administration, research, microfilming, and processing; and these our plan provides. For a time at least—perhaps 10 years or even 20—the building can house the records center as well. We must anticipate that eventually we shall have to construct in the suburbs a low and sturdy records center, simple and efficient; but the requirements for that building will be dictated as the need becomes felt. We estimate for the time being only, and we believe that our proposal is sound. We are following precisely the plan of the National Archives, which has expanded to Suitland and to Alexandria. We believe the pattern can be followed with profit by any large State government.

In all this we strive to be realistic, and we believe that in shaping our plans the expense and massive effort of a survey of bulk would have been both formidable and unnecessary. At the present stage of archival development, good disposal and microfilm programs are slowly removing much of the adipose tissue without any need for measuring it. Scheduled disposals will gradually bring stability, and developing experience with our own records center will demonstrate the possibility for adequate controls over the flow of records through the various State agencies.

If a formal survey of records bulk seems dispensable, surveys of other types are less easily dismissed. An architect will demand to know what is to be housed in the proposed records building and what activities are to be carried on there. He will need to know the

kind, types, and sizes of equipment to be installed, as well as the workflow and power requirement. These are simple and sensible questions, but before they can be answered surveys of the local situation and of the records staff, of present aims and of potential developments, are required. Such surveys are a basic necessity too seldom considered.

In most States the archival agency is of relatively recent origin. It frequently is regarded by older agencies as something of an upstart, and it can acquire a reputation as an officious youngster unless tact characterizes every contact. There is no standard arrangement of agencies and in every State there will be unique local variations in the pattern, but the archivist hoping for a building must be certain of his relationships with the State historical society, the State library, the State university, and the secretary of state; with the heads of other large and active agencies such as departments of agriculture, highways, and welfare; and with State fiscal officers such as the auditor, the treasurer, and the director of the budget. He must learn the legal limits of the jurisdiction of the archival agency and the possibilities for cooperation with or competition from other agencies that may be concerned in one way or another with records. Is there an established microfilm agency, and what is its position in relation to the archival agency? Equally essential is a careful survey of the archives staff itself. Just what ability and talent are available, and what do you want to accomplish? The aims of archival agencies vary tremendously from State to State. Here are a few samples of what those aims can be:

1. To trace lineage, verify vital statistics, search out records of military service, provide information regarding heraldic insignia, and assist in compiling family charts.
2. To provide—for political subdivisions (notably counties)—centralized housing and servicing of records.
3. To stimulate and regulate the systematic destruction of short-lived records at the end of their period of usefulness.
4. To salvage and preserve for reference and research those documents, originating in official agencies, that concern the development of the State government.
5. To provide a centralized photographic service, with photostat or microfilm equipment to serve not only the archives but also other State agencies.
6. To promote efficiency in State offices through a records management program.
7. To collect documents from private as well as official sources so as to document the development of industrial and commercial enterprises within the State.
8. To provide a center where both State officials and scholars can find the

materials and the informed assistance they may require to resolve research problems.

The list could be lengthened—what about exhibits, historical markers, publications?—but enough has been enumerated to show the diversity of programs. How many such aims do you pursue? How efficient is your staff in handling each? What facilities does each demand? Must your proposed building provide for each activity? Should your activities be expanded?

To sum up:

1. Merely to measure the bulk of records is not enough to provide data for constructing a building, and a good estimate will probably supply figures as useful as those compiled by an elaborate and time-consuming survey.
2. It is essential to survey the local situation and discover just what services the archival agency should be able to offer its State government.
3. To advance intelligently, an archival agency needs to plan for the "long pull," to survey its basic aims, and to foresee the space needs for its activities.

When you have all this clearly laid out in a logical pattern satisfactory to yourself, work with your architect and make him understand and appreciate just what you want to do and what facilities are required to accomplish it. Teach him the basic realities of records care and service, and you may be surprised at what he in turn can teach you of engineering and art. For architects are interesting and very agreeable people.

The Worm That Turned

The kurando-dokoro . . . originally had charge of the emperor's private property and his personal archives, but was without any administrative powers . . . But by the end of the ninth century . . . the influence of the new organ was such that it attracted the most talented persons, who could be sure of attaining high office. It came to be known in the official world as Tōryūmon, the Gateway of the Ascending Dragon.

—Sir George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*, p. 113-114 (Stanford, 1958). Quoted by permission of Stanford University Press.

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