

The Importance of Photocopy Projects for Local and Regional History

By ROBERT B. ECKLES*

Purdue University

IN the course of compiling and editing the *Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada* the condition of many resources for the study of local and regional history was brought forcefully to the attention of editors and others concerned. What was demonstrated beyond question was that reports on photocopied manuscripts indicated that, like an iceberg, only an eighth of the mass could be seen. Many manuscripts were submerged in the files of the repositories, unnoticed, unused, or simply unknown. This prevalent phenomenon indicates either that historians are ignorant of source materials available or that, because the materials are not *readily* available, historians do not use them.

The major problem for the historian or other researcher is to know what is available and then to find his materials arranged for easy use. Subsidiary but directly related to the historian's problem is that of the depository, to preserve its resources and to make them known. Librarians and archivists are well aware that many of their manuscripts and other source materials are literally falling to pieces from age, wear, and lack of satisfactory storage conditions. One of many examples discovered by the American Historical Association's Committee on Documentary Reproduction is the pressing need for preservation of Swedish-language newspapers, a superb source for the study of an immigrant group and its adjustment to a new life in the Middle West. Published about a century ago, most of these newspapers are now disinte-

*The author is chairman of the Committee on Documentary Reproduction of the American Historical Association. The committee functions to provide historians with research material and with bibliographical tools for this material. Under its auspices the *Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada* (xxxiv, 214 p.), edited by Richard W. Hale, Jr., was published in November 1961 by the Cornell University Press. Dr. Eckles' paper was read on Oct. 5, 1960, in the course of the 24th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Boston, at a meeting of the Society's Committee on Microfilming over which Dr. Hale, committee chairman, presided.

grating. The authorities in charge of the collection, at Augustana College, Rock Island, Ill., have become alarmed at its condition and are now trying to preserve it by photocopying.

Throughout the country other collections—not only of newspapers but of letters and other manuscripts that are first-rate sources for local and regional history—are slowly deteriorating and should be recorded on some form of photocopy. At the moment microfilm is probably the cheapest and easiest means of preserving a disintegrating collection, and once a master negative is made many positives may be taken from it. A repository has control of the microreproductions of its material and can make them available to historians at reasonable prices. Danger of loss through fire, natural causes, or bombing is greatly reduced if duplicate microreproductions are deposited in separate places.

An efficient use of microfilm was recently made in the photocopying of the Peter Barbeau papers, in the Carnegie Library of Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. These papers of a local fur trader are valuable for the study of both the fur trade and contemporary local conditions. The Minnesota Historical Society purchased a positive print of the papers and left the master negative with the Carnegie Library. Thus there are stored outside the repository a textually perfect duplicate of the originals and within the repository a negative from which other copies can be made as needed. By following some such procedure as this, county or even State repositories can make their untapped but often rich sources readily available to historians.

Gathering information on photocopied manuscripts for the *Guide* brought to light much information about the problems of librarians and archivists. Many repositories are operating on such very slim budgets that their manuscript holdings have never been read by the catalogers, with the result that they are at best imperfectly described. Moreover, some few repositories follow a policy of hoarding information—simply because someone is unwilling to take time to look at the material deep in the dust of a cellar.

Not many—but some—administrators seem to believe that photocopying their collections is somehow immoral and denigrating. One official in a State library believes, or at least seems to believe, that a scholar should travel to the library's manuscripts room and, after proving that he is of good character, should spend time and money in the State capital reading the original manuscript he needs to see. That a perfect duplicate might be made of the manuscript, saving travel expense and time and the cost of living away from home, seems to be of no concern. Fortunately, this type of admin-

istrator of local and State collections seems to be rare. Our present techniques of making photocopies provide the possibility for a program of photocopying for historians in any local or State repository.

That there is much unused material in local repositories—much that is not known to historians because of inadequate information—and that this material can be used to better advantage if it is photocopied, is beyond question. In one State several city libraries and county historical societies have source material on the early fur trade that has not been collated or used in any way. The account book and papers are available for inspection only if the historian wants to travel to two or three cities. It might well be a project of the historical society of this State to photocopy these sources and, while itself holding the master negative, to strike off as many positives as requested.

Local and State repositories that encourage and develop projects for photocopying manuscripts are to be congratulated on the help they are giving to university and college history departments, particularly to those engaged in the never-ending search for source materials for their graduate students to use. Departments of history, in the face of a flood of graduates who must be set to work writing master's theses, can be grateful for the photocopying of sources constituting new and generally unused material.

Another benefit that can come from photocopying local and State sources is the use that high schools some day may make of them. As yet few high schools—actually only a handful in the Nation—have the equipment to make use of any photocopy, but a time may come when the high school student will be asked to read the letters or other papers of a State Governor or of a man of local importance instead of turning to encyclopedias and other secondary sources for the history of a State or county. Once adequate photocopy readers are procured, there is no reason why high school history teachers cannot make use of photocopy in their teaching. Certainly State historical societies that undertake educational programs for high school students might consider the wider distribution by photocopy of basic material.

An ideal situation will exist in a few years—or it is to be *hoped* that it will exist—when the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections is completed. Since every repository and archive in the Nation will report to this central agency all of its holdings, the knowledge of what is available and where it is will be universal. In the meantime the manuscripts of importance now unused or little known can be preserved through photocopy, can be cor-

rectly identified, and (through the process of making positive prints) can become the "property" of researchers everywhere. Now is the time for historians to inquire of local and State repositories what is available that is generally unused or comparatively unknown. Such inquiry may bring to light manuscripts that can be photocopied and that in this form can be of service to universities and colleges, to high schools, and to the public generally.

Most archivists and librarians are willing to help, say that they want to be of service, and will answer direct inquiries. Institutions reporting data for the *Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials* often lacked funds (that is, salaries for editors or catalogers) to undertake a thorough examination of their materials. One librarian reported that a collection of letters valuable for the study of the French exploration and development of the Wabash Valley in the eighteenth century had not been read or indexed, although it had been inspected cursorily some 35 years ago. This neglect resulted on the one hand from lack of time by the librarians and on the other from lack of knowledge by local historians of the very existence of these papers. How representative this situation is of others throughout the Nation is not known. Some valuable manuscripts and collections undoubtedly now gather dust and deteriorate without attention because funds have been lacking for proper inspection and cataloging. Now is the time to inspect, publicize, and preserve through photocopying.

In preparing to edit the list of manuscripts in photocopy the editor of the *Guide* and others concerned discovered that many manuscripts of historical interest in private collections have not been photocopied. Yet private papers held by trusts or within the family of some important local figure might well be photocopied. In many cases the family had not been asked to make their papers available for photocopying—or for *any* use at *any* time. Many said that although they would prefer to keep the original manuscripts they would not object to photocopying. In these instances all that had to be done was to make arrangements for photocopying by the State or local society or the university concerned. Where families have been reluctant in the past to make their historical materials available to societies and universities, they might now be asked to allow photocopies to be made of all or at least part of their papers.

One of the brightest aspects of the use of and the interest in photocopied materials is that many universities and historical societies are beginning to launch programs of photocopying. Many excellent projects are now in existence. Some of these, though by

no means all, are those of the State historical societies of Georgia, Delaware, Kansas, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Wyoming and of the Public Archives of Canada, particularly the Brome County (Quebec Province) Historical Society collections.

Genealogists are deeply indebted to the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, for its vast and comprehensive program of photocopying family records in county and other local archives both in the United States and in Great Britain and Scandinavia. The University of Kentucky has made a special effort to collect photocopies of private papers whenever historians have been given access to them. Emory University, Atlanta, Ga., has undertaken and carried through with commendable success a project of photocopying Civil War diaries. In short, there is no lack of awareness of the need for and the importance of making available in photocopy State and local historical materials not hitherto generally known or used.

What is needed now is the organization by State and local historical societies and academic departments of history, as well as by other interested groups, of projects to inquire into the condition of valuable sources and the feasibility of preserving and disseminating these sources through photocopy. No one knows at present how many historical gaps may be filled, how many details may be added to historical outlines, and how much new light may be shed on regional, State, and local history by investigating neglected papers in local repositories. Even if photocopying preserves only what may be a comparatively valueless manuscript, a bit more of our heritage may thus be saved. A program of inquiry and photocopying may well add to the stature of the local repository, and it certainly can add to the sum of knowledge of local and regional history and can make this knowledge available to scholars everywhere.

Repository of Knowledge

It is understandable that purely scholarly labors of this sort should be much ridiculed . . . but their actual value is beyond reckoning . . . From time to time a researcher in some field in which no one else is interested will become a repository of knowledge that is extremely serviceable to his contemporary colleagues—serviceable as are dictionaries or archives.

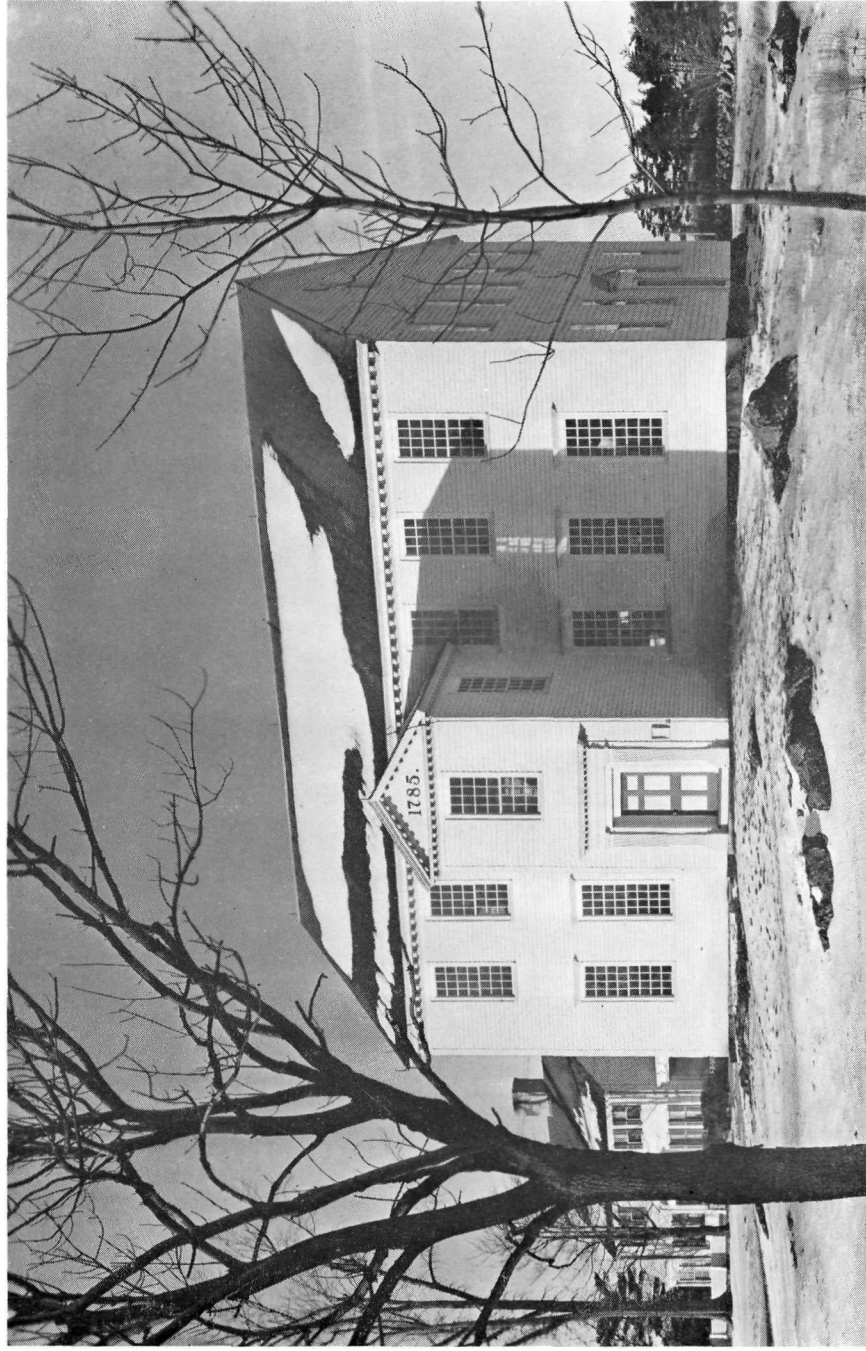
—HERMANN HESSE, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, p. 83 (Berlin, 1956).
Translation contributed by Paul Lewinson.



INTERIOR, ROCKY HILL MEETINGHOUSE, AMESBURY

—*Courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities*

When the society acquired the meetinghouse property the town records of Amesbury were stored in the cupboards beneath the pulpit.



Rocky Hill Meetinghouse, Amesbury, Massachusetts
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