

State Archival Agencies' Services to Other State Agencies

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IN popular fancy, and indeed in actual practice, the services of State archival agencies to historians and genealogists are apt to take precedence over those to other agencies of State government. We State Archives staff members are so busy aiding historians—professional and amateur—in their research problems and helping mink-coated dowagers to trace their ancestry back to buckskin-shirted frontiersmen that we often find ourselves with little time available to serve other State agencies.

We must face the fact, however, that governmental agencies increasingly need help to solve their records problems; and I submit that it is time for us to consider shifting our emphasis and reapportioning our time and effort. Only thus can we contribute effectively to governmental efficiency by promoting sound policies and programs with respect to public records of the various branches and offices of government, both State and local. Without disparaging in any way the importance of services to local governments, however, I shall limit my discussion to services rendered to governmental agencies at the State level.

From State to State, the organizational pattern encompassing the archival agency varies. The Archives may be a division of some State department, or it may itself be a separate department or agency. Besides its strictly archival functions, it may publish books, administer a historic sites program, and even include a museum. Archival and records management functions may be combined in one agency or may be separated.

In preparing a paper on this subject an archivist must inevitably be guided by his own conception of a State archival agency. If his experience has been in an institution where the archival agency is also in charge of records management, his approach will obviously

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differ from that of the archivist of the more classical school who believes that the first amendment to the Constitution should have provided the same separation between archives and records management as between church and state. My own experience has convinced me that there is no sharp line of demarcation between archival work and records management.

Having established a frame of reference, I shall now consider the question of service to other agencies of State government. There are at least five major areas in which we in State archival agencies can render services to the other State agencies. There may indeed be more, but these appear to be the most important.

First—and I immediately rush into that area claimed as the special province of records managers—we can assist and advise other agencies in the solution of their current records problems. These problems may relate to: (1) standardization of forms and elimination of unnecessary records, reports, and extra copies; (2) the kinds of paper, ink, ribbons, and other supplies that should be used for records to insure higher quality and greater permanence; (3) filing equipment and techniques and the utilization of space to improve accessibility and facilitate the weeding out of material scheduled for destruction; (4) the use of microfilm as a means of saving space and providing security for records and the provision of central microfilm services for other agencies; and (5) the use of different types of machines and methods for recording and copying. A myriad of new machines and devices, many heralded by extravagant claims about the permanence of their output, is being offered. A recent survey conducted by our State Archivist revealed that more than 300 "instant" copiers, manufactured by 18 different companies, were being used by our State agencies. Many had been bought without adequate knowledge of their capabilities and limitations. Agencies want, and urgently need, assistance in each of these five classes of current records problems.

Second, we can cooperate with State agencies in the scheduling of their records and in the disposal of useless records. With space and filing equipment problems always acute, the harassed custodian urgently needs help in such disposal. It is well to note that custodians will be encountered who are as far apart as the poles in their thinking. One custodian will consider everything not in current use as so much junk. The other will be loath to destroy anything and will classify practically every scrap of paper as permanently valuable. The archivist, with wider experience and having appreciation of historical values, can view scheduling problems more ob-

jectively and in better perspective. Either by helping to prepare disposal schedules or by reviewing existing schedules, he can insure the retention of materials that should ultimately be transferred to archival custody, and at the same time he can encourage the destruction of useless records. Incidentally, he will be rendering great service to the State archives also by insuring the elimination of useless material before a collection is received for permanent preservation.

Third, we can accept from State agencies records that are not in current administrative use, thus relieving the agencies of problems in preserving them and in making them available. Until very recently many archivists were accustomed to think of the word *archives* as a synonym for *old records*. With the National Archives setting an example, however, State archival agencies are now accepting records of recent origin. For example, the State Archives of North Carolina has already accessioned the Governor's papers for 1960 and the 1961 records of at least one State agency. Having accepted records, the archives has the duty to repair them as necessary; arrange, label, and shelve them; describe them in finding aids; and make them available for the use of the originating agencies and the public. It might be well to have an understanding with State agencies about the kinds of finding aids that will be prepared for their records. The large volume of records now being accessioned cannot be described document by document in the manner of the calendars of bygone days.

Fourth, we can do research for other governmental agencies and give them the information they need from their noncurrent records in the archives. Overall economy and efficiency result from the concentration in one place of both records and the personnel to service them. A few examples of reference service for other governmental agencies come to mind: (1) furnishing information on past experience and performance that will help an agency to develop plans and policies; (2) making certified copies of records that may be required; (3) ascertaining dates of appointments, revocations, and other personnel matters; (4) providing evidence that may be required by the courts; (5) providing fiscal information for budgeting or other purposes; and (6) preparing replies to requests received by State agencies for information known or believed to be in records transferred to the archives.

Fifth—in military parlance—we can also serve in a staff capacity to other government agencies, providing a variety of services not necessarily related to materials stored in the archives. Under

this heading we can: (1) review or initiate legislation relative to archives and public records; (2) assist the attorney general and others in the preparation of legal interpretations or opinions concerning archival materials and other public records; (3) prepare replies to queries addressed to the Governor and other State officials on matters of archival or historical interest; (4) give advice and assistance on plans for celebrations and dedications of historical significance; (5) make and carry out policies and projects to increase the store of authentic information about the history of the State; (6) prepare speeches on historical subjects for the Governor and other State officials; and (7) provide representation on various boards, commissions, and committees concerned with historical matters.

A founder and past president of this Society, Christopher Crittenden, then Director of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, in his presidential address to the Society, October 27, 1948, posed a still pertinent question on the responsibilities of an archivist in serving his government:

Let's ask ourselves what should be the primary objectives and major functions of the archivist. If we can answer that question, perhaps we can see the situation more clearly. Can we not say that in general it is the archivist's primary duty to render the greatest possible service to the government of which his agency is a part and to the public at large? More specifically, is it not his duty to preserve and protect those records of his government which are worth preserving, to bring those records under control, to let would-be users know what materials are in his custody, and to make those materials available for use?¹

Year by year the problems of public records have become increasingly more diverse and complicated, and no longer can there be any doubt about the importance of a State archival agency as a servant of government. Like it or not, we are compelled to devote more of our time and effort to the records problems of State governmental agencies. Our opportunities for service in this field are indeed broad and challenging.

¹ Christopher Crittenden, "The Archivist as a Public Servant," in *American Archivist*, 12:6 (Jan. 1949).

Resurrection

There are times (as the first curator of manuscripts must have remarked to himself) when buried documents show a strong inclination to kick off their tombstones and emerge into the light of common day.

— *Douglas Library Notes*, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 8 (Spring 1963).