

Iowa—The Challenge of the Archives

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THE problems of the preservation of the Iowa State archives over the past century and a quarter are, with one exception perhaps, not unlike those of most other States. The exception is that the capital of the Territory and State has been moved three times—from Belmond in Wisconsin to Burlington, Iowa City, and then Des Moines in Iowa.¹ During its brief session in Burlington, in 1837, the Territorial legislature lost by fire the frame building that housed not only the legislature but many records as well. The records that survived the flames, after being housed in Old Zion Church in Burlington, were moved into the Butler Capitol² at Iowa City before being transferred to our greatly revered Old Stone Capitol, the building used from 1842 to 1857. Finally, in 1857, it was voted to move the capital to Des Moines. There is no doubt that during these several removals many priceless records were lost.

In the winter of 1857 the precious accumulations of nearly 20 years were loaded on bobsleds and drawn by ox teams to the new capital—Des Moines. According to a report issued by Benjamin F. Shambaugh, again there was loss and destruction:

Perhaps the letters of John Chambers were left in a confused heap on the floor of the Old Stone Capitol. Perhaps the papers of Ansel Briggs and Stephen Hempstead were thrown away or burned by the janitors. Perhaps

*Paper read, Oct. 6, 1961, at the 25th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, in Kansas City, Mo., as part of a session concerning archives programs of the Central Missouri Valley States over which Theodore J. Cassady presided. Dr. Petersen, member of the history department of the University of Iowa, research associate of the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa City from 1930 to 1947 and superintendent of the society since 1947, is well known to most of our readers. He is a historian of Iowa and the trans-Mississippi West and author of many studies, particularly of steamboating on the Mississippi River. "Steamboat Bill," as he is called, is now the dean of directors of historical societies in the upper Mississippi Valley States, where the State archival movement had its inception in the early decades of this century.

¹Jacob A. Swisher, "The Capitols at Des Moines," in *Iowa Journal of History*, 39: 52-87 (Jan. 1941).

²See William J. Petersen, "Walter Butler: Capitol Builder," in *Palimpsest*, 36: 485-492 (Dec. 1955).

the Executive Journals of John Chambers and James Clarke were used to kindle fires on the way to the Raccoon Forks of the Des Moines. Who knows? Fortunately, however, the manuscripts were not all lost. The letters and records of the Lucas administration were safe at Plum Grove. Then, too, the letters and correspondence of Secretary Conway (alas for his reputation) survived the wrecks of moving. And the Executive Journal of the Governors from Briggs to Lowe have recently been discovered.³

The cataloging and preservation of these records were not assured when the bobsleds reached Des Moines. Permanent lodging was not yet guaranteed—the quarter-century sojourn in the Old Brick Capitol⁴ was followed by a gradual shift to the present State Capitol Building between 1883 and 1885. Twenty years later, at the beginning of this century, it became apparent that something had to be done to catalog and preserve the myriad documents that comprised the State archives.

Although the State Historical Department had been established in Des Moines, its functions had not been sharply defined. The work of the State library and museum appears to have taken precedence in the minds of the department's founders. Soon a building to house the library and museum was planned for Des Moines, and those in charge began to think more seriously in terms of the preservation of the State archives. To make a survey of Iowa's needs they chose the aforementioned Benjamin F. Shambaugh, of Iowa City, then a curator at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Dr. Shambaugh had been serving on a committee of the American Historical Association for the study of State archives and was the author of reports on this problem published by the association in 1896 and 1901.⁵

It is interesting that, after Shambaugh had made his significant reports on the public archives of Iowa, the governing board of the historical society gave sober thought to one of the following prospects: losing to Des Moines their fellow member, the editor and moving spirit of the historical society; having him direct both the Des Moines and the Iowa City institutions; or creating for him a

³ "The Story of the Public Archives" as reprinted in the form of a leaflet from a report published in the *Mail and Times*, Nov. 17, 1906.

⁴ The first Capitol in Des Moines was a three-story brick building.

⁵ Professor Shambaugh had already demonstrated his interest in the State records of Iowa by publishing through the State Historical Society the following: *Iowa City; a Contribution to the Early History of Iowa* (1893), *Constitution and Records of the Claim Associations of Johnson County, Iowa* (1894), *Documentary Material Relating to the History of Iowa* (3 vols., 1897-1901), *Fragments of the Debates of the Iowa Constitutional Conventions of 1844 and 1846* (1900), and *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa* (7 vols., 1903-5).

rewarding position in Iowa City. They chose the third course of action, and in January 1907 Shambaugh became Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa and professor of political science (and virtually head of the department) at the State University of Iowa. His contribution to Iowa history and Iowa government in these two roles was well assessed by the Brookings Institution in its report on Iowa government in 1932.⁶

The Hall of Archives at Des Moines had in the meantime come under the direction of Cassius C. Stiles. If a question is raised as to Stiles' qualifications, one may quickly answer that he was doubtless as well equipped for the post as were the better archivists of that period. One must remember that there was then no National Archives, no Society of American Archivists. Stiles built well on the foundation laid by Shambaugh. His occasional progress reports in the *Annals of Iowa* were followed by his *Public Archives; a Manual for Their Administration in Iowa*, a substantial 181-page report, issued with the compliments of his department during the meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in Des Moines in 1928. In this report Stiles declared:

After years of struggling and uphill work, Iowa, we think, has reached the top of the grade and can now move along evenly and smoothly. The Public Archives Division is now recognized as an established institution and is cared for by the appropriations in the same manner as the other established institutions of the state, and does not require the constant watching and labor of obtaining a special appropriation for its support. We have reached the point where we have the hearty co-operation and appreciation of all the state officers, members of boards, bureaus, commissions, etc.

This was not merely a self-indulgent opinion from Iowa. In a report on public archives,⁷ Theodore C. Blegen of the Minnesota Historical Society declared:

We need not go far to find an excellent example of the success of archives administration . . . Our neighbor, Iowa, leads the states of the West in the archives movement. . . . It is apparent that Iowa has developed a thoroughly scientific plan of archives care, and beyond question is a state whose example in this respect is worthy of close study by officials who have as a part of their work the administration of public records. Experts in the science of archive economy declare that it is an example that other states should follow.

⁶ *Report on a Survey of Administration in Iowa Submitted to Committee on Reduction of Governmental Expenditures by the Institute for Government Research of the Brookings Institution*, p. 211 (Washington, D. C., 1933).

⁷ Theodore C. Blegen, "A Report on the Public Archives," in State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Bulletin of Information*, no. 94, p. 57-60 (Nov. 1918).

Unhappily, the sound methods instituted by Benjamin F. Shambaugh and followed by Cassius C. Stiles appear to have fallen on evil days. Stiles died in 1938. No one of his several successors had had any experience in archival work. Nor did they attune themselves to a professional group then coming into its own with the establishment of the National Archives in Washington and the launching of the *American Archivist*.

It should be pointed out, however, that Fred L. Mahannah, who was serving as State Archivist in 1940, did have the foresight to write to the National Archives for the "essential features of a modern State Archives Building" and received a detailed letter with 22 points recommended to secure the desired results. World War II intervened; and by 1946 the incorporation of an Archives into a War Memorial Building was recommended to the legislature. The architect's handsome drawing gave mute testimony that the structure would probably violate all sound functional principles. Iowa, in company with many other States, already had such an architectural gem. Fortunately, no appropriation was forthcoming.

Since 1946, when Curator Ora Williams urged the construction of a War Memorial-Archives Building, the Archives has lived on as the poor relation of half a dozen other departments that occupy the original home of what since 1938 has been called the State Department of History and Archives. The high-sounding title Hall of Archives no longer applies to the main Department Building but rather to a separate, relatively shabby structure, never designed for its present use, and possessing few of the requisites prescribed by the National Archives in its letter of 1940. Records have been stored in tunnels, cellars, and leaky attics; and they have been allowed to disintegrate slowly and in some cases simply to molder away to nothing.

Microfilming, however, was introduced some years ago, and during the past biennium great progress was made. In a letter dated September 29, 1961, Curator Jack Musgrove, who directed the museum of the historical department before assuming his present post, wrote me as follows:

With the appropriation of \$15,000 per year, the state department of History and Archives inaugurated the microfilming department to handle the enormous volume of state records . . .

With the meager appropriation, basic microfilming equipment was purchased and pertinent records occupying a large volume of space were first on the agenda. . . .

Additional microfilming equipment has been purchased in the last year with the addition of two planetary cameras which allows us to go ahead with other types of documents that could not be handled with rotary equipment. The addition of a Reader Printer has made our microfilmed records more available to the various departments and has brought about a greater acceptance of microfilming by the departments.

Over a two-year period, our new program makes it possible to live within the physical structure provided by the state and, although, the budget is meager, it provides us with a much more adequate program than has been carried on for the last twenty years. . . .

Additional microfilming equipment has been added to the newspaper division of our state Archives . . . but we have now tripled the amount of material by microfilming daily . . .

It is felt that Iowa is making a good start in the Archives program, although much enlargement is contemplated for the coming years.

The problems of our Iowa Archives have been recognized by every curator of the Des Moines institution since Edgar R. Harlan. They have become really acute since Stiles' death in 1938. Three things obviously are needed—space, personnel, and a reasonable budget with which to operate. All *three* are needed! It will do little good to spend money on a building, salaries, and operating expenses unless a competent professional archivist, well grounded in Iowa history and Iowa government, is employed to guide the destiny of the institution. It will take a dedicated as well as competent individual even to begin to regain the ground lost during the past two decades. Such a person could guide a State architect (who all too often has no concept of the proper form of an archives building) to plan a building really tailored to the needs of archival work. Such a building need not cost a fortune, but it certainly will be costly if it is constructed, without guidance, by an average State architect. The next few years will be significant in determining the direction in which Iowa will go in its archival program.

Plan now to attend—

THE 27TH ANNUAL MEETING

SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

Raleigh, N.C.

October 2-5, 1963