

Puerto Rico—The Documents Administration Program

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EVERY legally constituted government throughout history has been conscious of its need for a properly organized archives. These documentary repositories are the memory of government; they are the sources of precedent for official acts and policies; and they are quite often the guides for future action. For one reason or another, all responsible governments have put varying amounts of thought and effort into the establishment and maintenance of archival institutions. The archives themselves may be centralized or dispersed in many governmental agencies; they may be simple or highly complex; they may be large or small; but they are always essential to the conduct of official business.

For reasons and circumstances that now belong to history the Government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico found itself in the recent past without an organization for the disciplined and methodical study and practice of archival techniques and procedures. To fill this void, efforts were made with two valid considerations in mind, which are mutually helpful in setting up a program of records and archival administration. The first consideration was to introduce efficiency in the administration of governmental offices, always weighing such factors as economy, expediency, and proper procedures. The other consideration was the knowledge that government is custodian of the cultural heritage of its people and must preserve and make available the sources of its political, social, and economic history.

After much study and consultation, in which the National Archives of the United States was especially helpful, the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico passed an act (approved December 8, 1955) "To establish a Program for the Preservation and Disposal

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of Public Documents."¹ This legislation provided for the establishment of the General Archives of Puerto Rico and for a governmentwide program of records administration.

This act, as passed, provided that the Archives should "be administratively attached to the University of Puerto Rico" and should be supervised by the chancellor of the university.² This provision was later changed by an executive order of the Governor, dated June 19, 1956, so that the Archives now functions under the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. To further its program the Archives must deal with the three branches of government. Each branch administers its own program independently but according to the aims and procedures established by the organic act. This means that in each branch of government there is a records administrator responsible for the program in his branch. The Governor of Puerto Rico is the records administrator for the executive branch; the chief justice of the supreme court for the judicial branch; and the president of each house of the legislative assembly for the legislative branch. Each of the formally designated administrators may delegate to a subordinate his authority relating to the program in his branch of government.

Within the executive branch each department, agency, or public corporation head is responsible to the Governor for the proper administration of the program and is subject to the rules emanating from the Governor in his capacity as records administrator.⁴ Each agency must "strike an inventory" of its documents "except those going back to Spanish sovereignty and those that are more than fifty (50) years old" and must transfer these earlier records to the General Archives unless it can certify that those documents are still necessary for its administrative use.⁵ For the disposition of more recent material each agency prepares disposition lists, which are submitted to the records administrator. This official submits copies of the lists to the Archivist, who analyzes the records and requires the transfer to the General Archives of all that he considers to be of permanent value. No document may be destroyed

¹ This act has been printed, in Spanish and English, on p. 78-93 of *Leyes de Puerto Rico* (P. Del. S. 450 [Núm. 5])—*Laws of Puerto Rico* (S.B. 450, Rec. [No. 5]). The later footnotes in this paper all refer to the organizational act and therefore give only sections rather than full citations to the *Laws of Puerto Rico*.

² Secs. 7, 8, *et passim*.

³ Sec. 4 (a) and (b).

⁴ Sec. 4 (b).

⁵ Sec. 4 (c); sec. 11. By sec. 11 (b), however, records that are kept in notarial archives and in registries of property are specifically exempted from transfer to the Archives.

except through this procedure, which assures the intervention of the Archivist.⁶

The official delegated as records administrator for the executive branch is the director of the Bureau of the Budget. This bureau has initiated a records administration program for all the executive agencies. The General Archives participates in this program, which includes the study of correspondence control, disposition procedures, and filing systems. To improve the quality and the professional *esprit de corps* of records administration personnel, an association has recently been founded. We believe that such an association will not only facilitate the training of records personnel but will also do much to raise professional standards. This group has already cosponsored some training activities, such as a seminar in which the Deputy Archivist of the United States participated.

Thus far this article has discussed chiefly the records administration program. As for the archival program, an Archives Advisory Commission has been established, to meet once a year. The Archivist is permanent secretary of this commission and the other four members represent the Governor of Puerto Rico, the chief justice of the supreme court, the legislature, and the director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.⁷

The act specifically states the duties of the Archivist; he is "responsible for the custody, preservation, and use of all the documents existing in the Archives."⁸ He is permitted to accept in the Archives as purchases or donations manuscripts that "he deems to be of sufficient worth to justify their preservation." Furthermore, he is required to take steps to acquire documents "found outside Puerto Rico" if they are important for the history of Puerto Rico. If such acquisition is impossible, however, he may obtain instead photographic reproductions or other copies of such documents.⁹

The act promises funds for the Archives for "preservation of documents by modern methods" (including a fumigating chamber, a photographic laboratory, and other necessary equipment); for arranging and inventorying records; for "reproducing, publishing, and exhibiting" them; and for making documents available to government agencies and the public.¹⁰

⁶ Sec. 4 (d) and (e).

⁷ Sec. 9. The act provides for representation of the chancellor of the university, but (as noted earlier) this has been modified by executive order of the Governor.

⁸ Sec. 10.

⁹ Sec. 12 and 13.

¹⁰ Sec. 14.

The General Archives now has in its care about 11,700 cubic feet of documents. When its permanent building is ready for use, its accessions will be considerably increased. The Archivist has also authorized the destruction of some 58,000 cubic feet of extra copies and other useless papers.

A reference service is maintained for government agencies that have transferred documents to the Archives, for institutions, and for persons doing research work. Our holdings are open to the public for all legitimate research. Very rarely have series of documents been accepted with restrictions on their use. There are no fees for research services except when a certified copy of a document is required.

A document preservation workshop has been established in which the William J. Barrow methods of neutralization and lamination are applied. Mr. Barrow, document restorer, has trained our personnel in these techniques. Maps, books, and manuscripts, after undergoing the necessary treatment, are rebound and made available for use. All documents are submitted to a vacuum-fumigation process before they are integrated with the existing collections; this is a necessary safeguard against bookworms and other destructive insects that abound in our tropical climate. For the same purpose the Archives Building is periodically treated to prevent invasion by termites or other pests.

The Archivo General de Puerto Rico maintains a training program for its archivists through which they are accepted for inservice training at the National Archives in Washington, where they also participate in the archival courses given at the American University. Thus we hope to give our archivists the necessary basic training in the history and techniques of archival administration.

Although still a young organization, the Archivo General is already helping to solve the records administration problems of the government of Puerto Rico and helping, too, in serious research work. Its most important function is the preservation of primary historical sources for the benefit of the people of Puerto Rico.¹¹

¹¹ Señor Rodríguez Morales is the author of a volume of *Ensayos y Conferencias*, published in Barcelona by Ediciones Rumbos in 1962 (157 p.). The several essays in the volume are concerned with Puerto Rican culture in general, and one of them ("El programa de administración de documentos públicos en Puerto Rico") is an earlier version, in Spanish, of the present article.—Ed.