

Horizons Unlimited

By LEON DEVALINGER, JR.*

Delaware Public Archives Commission

ONE of the founders of our Country and one of Delaware's great statesmen was John Dickinson, known as the "Penman of the Revolution." He wrote all of the important documents of the Continental Congress prior to the Declaration of Independence. Later he was to draft the Articles of Confederation, preside as chairman of the Annapolis Convention, and serve with the Delaware delegation to the Federal Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. His chief contribution to the great document that emanated from that historic meeting was the provision that each State should have two members in the Senate, in order to protect the rights of the smaller States.

It was not an accident that Delaware on December 7, 1787, was the first to ratify the new Federal Constitution. Dickinson and the other members of the Delaware delegation, who were the same ones attending the Annapolis Convention, had thoroughly informed the citizens of our State regarding the advantages of this frame of government. In some other States there was an alarming hesitation to ratify this new Constitution. Dickinson had fired the imagination of the American colonists and helped solidify their thinking in opposition to the Stamp Act of 1767 in a series of letters signed "A Farmer." Using the same technique, he wrote in 1788, under the name "Fabius," a series of nine letters urging the speedy ratification of the new Constitution. These reveal his fine classical education as well as thorough legal training at the Middle Temple. Many of his thoughts are particularly appropriate today.¹

One hundred and seventy-five years ago Dickinson wrote, "This globe of ours therefore is a speck in creation. Self is a speck upon this globe."² More directly to our interests is his statement: "The historian being a man of business, and well acquainted with the

* President deValinger read this paper before the Society of American Archivists at the Society's annual dinner meeting in Raleigh, N.C., on Oct. 3, 1963, as the 1963 presidential address. A founder member and Fellow of the Society, Mr. deValinger was elected vice president in 1961 and succeeded to the presidency in 1962. He is the State Archivist of Delaware.

¹ Charles J. Stillé, *The Life and Times of John Dickinson 1732-1808*, in *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, 13: 9-261, *passim* (Philadelphia, 1891); Leon deValinger, Jr., *The John Dickinson Mansion*, p. 8 (Friends of John Dickinson Mansion, Inc., Dover, Del., 1954).

² *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, Esquire*, 2: 251 (Wilmington, Del., 1801).

world, his observations are drawn from life and manners, and therefore the fragments of his work are held in such universal esteem."³ All of us are charged with the care and custody of historical materials and some of us are active as historians. In such company it may be assumed that it would be pertinent to narrate something of the history and the historians' part in the founding of an early State Archives Commission.

At the December 1899 meeting of the American Historical Association, in Boston, a Public Archives Commission was constituted under the leadership of a committee comprising William MacDonald, James Harvey Robinson, Howard W. Caldwell, and Lester G. Bugbee. The committee began its work by selecting adjunct or associate members in each State.⁴ Distinguished historians in many States surveyed and described the situation regarding the records of their States and made reports of their findings through the Public Archives Commission. These reports served as a foundation for the establishment or improvement of the archival situation in many of our States. The reports of the surveys made in other States under the auspices of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association soon reached those individuals and patriotic organizations active in Delaware. We find that the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Delaware was very active in advocating legislation for the establishment of a Division of Public Records. As a result, a bill was passed on March 16, 1905, by the Delaware Legislature creating such an agency. Its six members were chosen from Delaware patriotic and historical societies and were appointed by the Governor for two-year terms to serve without compensation.⁵ The bylaws drawn up by these appointees provided that we were to classify, catalog, and preserve all public records at the State and county levels dated prior to 1800. The original members were Miss Julia Ford Burton, Hon. Henry C. Conrad, Dr. George W. Marshall, Mrs. Henry Ridgely, Dr. Thomas Robinson, and Mrs. J. Ernest Smith.⁶ To the members of this infant Division of Public Records all State and county records up to 1800 must have seemed to be a wide horizon. The minutes reflect that they were in a considerable quandary as to how to pursue their duties. Letters of inquiry seeking assistance were written to Prof. Herman V. Ames, chairman of

³ *Ibid.*, 2:225.

⁴ *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1900*, 2:5-25 (Washington, 1901).

⁵ *Laws of the State of Delaware . . .*, 23:119-120 (Dover, 1905).

⁶ Manuscript Minutes of the Division of Public Records, Dover, Del., 1906, p. 5.

the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, Prof. Edgar Dawson, representing that Commission in Delaware, Mrs. Hester Dorsey Richardson, president of the Maryland Division of Records, Hon. Thomas M. Owens of Alabama, Mr. Robert T. Swan of Massachusetts, and Mr. Luther R. Kelker, Custodian of Public Records for Pennsylvania. Professor Ames came to one of the meetings of the Division and kindly gave the benefit of his advice and experience.⁷ It should be remembered that at that time there was no Society of American Archivists and no National Archives and very few State archival agencies with much past experience. The members of the Division soon divided themselves into two principal committees: one on publications and one to survey the records of counties in which they lived. At this time there were no paid employees. Imagine, if you will, these gubernatorial appointees going into the lofts of the Old State House, courthouses, and other records depositories in search of all records prior to 1800. They accumulated the records of the State and counties from cellars, basements, closets, and overcrowded public offices. These were placed in packing boxes carefully locked and labeled and some of the more valuable records were deposited in bank vaults.

It is most appropriate at this time to acknowledge and express gratitude for the faithful and dedicated public services of those members who have served on our own Commission as well as those of other States who worked for the preservation of archival materials. We have been most successful in having prominent citizens participate in our activities from the beginning. There have been judges, attorneys, and businessmen, as well as prominent women who have been unselfish in giving their time and efforts. Notable among these was Mrs. Henry Ridgely. She was one of the original members of the Commission; she served as an officer from the beginning and for many years was president. She remained continuously a member of the Commission from her appointment in 1905 until her death in 1962. Much of the success of the archival program in Delaware has been due to the untiring efforts and devotion of this remarkable lady.

In 1906 Prof. Edgar Dawson of Delaware College (now University of Delaware) and later of Princeton University completed his survey of State and county records in Delaware. In the introductory portion Professor Dawson stated: "There is probably no State in the Union where one would find less material for writing

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

its history than in Delaware, and there is certainly no one of the original thirteen in which so few records have been made and where so little care has been taken of those that have been made." He also stated: "The few archives that, despite her unfortunate early history, ought still to be found in Delaware have almost entirely disappeared on account of the carelessness of officials who were ignorant of their value or on account of the dishonesty of students and antiquarians from without and within the State who have abused the confidence of the State officials."⁸ This shocking report stimulated continued interest in the early records. The minutes show that the Commissioners who were working at collecting, sorting, and classifying were aided by volunteer workers. An appropriation of \$1,000 was granted in 1907 by the legislature. This may seem insignificant today but at that time a paid clerical worker was being remunerated at the rate of 25c an hour.

An event of the first importance occurred in 1909 when Mrs. Sarah Wistar Miller of Media, Pennsylvania, presented to the Division the Royal Charter, dated March 2, 1682, from Charles II of England to the Duke of York. Accompanying it were two deeds from James, Duke of York, to William Penn, dated August 24, 1682, for the land and water comprising the State of Delaware.⁹ These were gifts of great significance to the archives of our State. Two years later, however, on March 14, 1911, the horizon of the Commission was broadened again. The name of the Division of Public Records was changed to the Public Archives Commission and the scope of records being collected was increased from the year 1800 to 1850 for State and county records.¹⁰ There had also been increased appropriations for salaries and office expenses and for the publication of the early volumes of the *Delaware Archives* series. It was at this same time that Mr. Walter G. Tatnall began part-time work for the Commission and in 1913 became the first State Archivist. It was also at this time that the Commission moved into its own quarters, the "Hall of Records," located in the basement of the new library wing of the State House.¹¹ It was of fireproof construction and had steel cabinets and other equipment judged at that time to be adequate for archival purposes. Heretofore, the valuable records being collected were in wooden packing cases or in

⁸ *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1906*, 2:129 (Washington, 1908).

⁹ State of Delaware, *Journal of the House of Representatives . . .*, 1909, p. 231-240; *Laws of the State of Delaware . . .*, 25:561 (Dover, 1909).

¹⁰ *Laws of the State of Delaware . . .*, 26:165-167 (Dover, 1911).

¹¹ Manuscript Minutes of the Division of Public Records, Dover, Del., 1913, p. 77, 74.

bank vaults. He worked assiduously through the years collecting, classifying, indexing various record groups, and publishing the first five volumes of the *Delaware Archives* series until his resignation on June 30, 1924. He was succeeded by the Hon. Henry C. Conrad, a retired judge of the State superior court, local historian, and former president of the Historical Society of Delaware, who had served the Public Archives Commission for many years previously. As the second State Archivist he added to the collections and continued the important work of classifying and making the record groups available. He was also interested in publishing the earliest Assembly Journals and pamphlets of local interest. His efforts continued until his death in October of 1930 when Dr. George H. Ryden, chairman of the department of history, University of Delaware, was selected as the third State Archivist and began his duties on December 1, 1930.¹² The present State Archivist at the same time assumed his duties as Assistant State Archivist. Both were professional historians with the interest and training of historians. It was natural that among their early activities were historical publications; and the custody of the historic markers program in the State was taken over in 1933. Duties and visitors increased as did the staff and budgets. Microphotography was introduced in 1938. We moved to the new Hall of Records Building from the basement of the Old State House on May 1, 1939.¹³ The testing of papers, inks, and other writing materials had been added to the Commission's responsibilities as had also been the restoration of manuscripts by the Barrow method with the purchase of Barrow Laminator #2 in 1940.¹⁴

The prewar years were occupied with projects of the National Youth Administration, the Works Project Administration, and the Federal Writers Project. On the death of the State Archivist in October 1941 the Assistant succeeded him.¹⁵ In the wartime period there were war history projects, the expansion of the microfilming work, and the introduction of records management, which we call "public records administration."¹⁶ All the while we have been disproving parts of Professor Dawson's report by locating and making accessible record groups, valuable for historians and others,

¹² *Ibid.*, 1930, vol. 2, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1939, vol. 2, p. 172.

¹⁴ Unpublished Annual Report of the Public Archives Commission, July 1, 1939-June 30, 1940, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Annual Report of the Public Archives Commission, State of Delaware . . . for the Fiscal Year . . . 1942*, p. 1 (Dover, 1942).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5-15.

thought to have been lost. Meanwhile, the Hall of Records was filled; disposals and microfilming helped relieve the situation but could not keep up with the making and accumulation of records. Attempts were made to get more space but these efforts were unsuccessful.

The public, not only in our own State but throughout the Country, was making more demands for services. We had an increased number of visitors and we realized that the picture magazines and television were making inroads on reading. There was a greater demand for visual materials. We added sound recordings, motion pictures, and color slides, and our collection of still photographs rose by the hundreds. As requests for services increased, so did staff and budgets and our horizons broaden. We were well aware that to conserve our cultural heritage and comply with the requests for greater services and increased interpretation of our great collections of archival materials, we had to broaden our programs and increase our efforts.

The first step in this direction was the acceptance of a gift of the Old Presbyterian Church in Dover, which had been built in 1790. There the State Constitution of 1792, drafted by John Dickinson, had been adopted. The church was restored and opened on December 15, 1950, as the Delaware State Museum.¹⁷ It was soon followed by renovation of the Sunday School building nearby as State Museum Building #2 and the old Dover Gas Light Company plant nearby was refurbished later and opened as State Museum Building #3. This is a museum devoted to telling the Delaware story from the earliest times to some aspects of the present. From a few thousand visitors in the first years of its opening we now have an attendance of about 13,000 a year and the figure is growing.

The success of the Delaware State Museum was soon followed by the acquisition of the John Dickinson Mansion six miles southeast of Dover. The boyhood home of the "Penman of the Revolution" was purchased by the National Society of Colonial Dames of America in the State of Delaware and presented to the State through our Public Archives Commission.¹⁸ It in turn is administered as a branch of the Delaware State Museum of which the State Archivist serves as Director. With our historical resources, research facilities, and awareness of preserving our cultural resources we serve as the official historical agency of the State and in

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Public Archives Commission, State of Delaware . . . for the Fiscal Year . . . 1951*, p. 48 (Dover, 1951).

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Public Archives Commission, State of Delaware . . . for the Fiscal Year . . . 1953*, p. 40 (Dover, 1953).

this capacity are aiding considerably in building a tourist industry in Delaware. Rapidly we have been acquiring historical houses and sites, many of which have been threatened by the wrecker or the bulldozer. Among those recently acquired are "The Lindens," a miller's house at Old Duck Creek near Smyrna; the Fisher House at Cool Spring, Sussex County; the Old Court House in Georgetown; the Allee House of about 1753 near Bombay Hook; and, more recently, "The Sign of the Buck Tavern," where General Washington and other notables stayed when traveling north and south. This tavern is on the south bank of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal near Summit Bridge. Other houses and buildings of a similar nature are in prospect. In February 1962 Fort Christina State Park in Wilmington, where the first Swedish settlement in the New World was made on March 29, 1638, was transferred to our Commission and designated as Fort Christina Monument. As the administrators of this historic site and the agency of the State with the proper historical facilities, we cooperated on March 29, 1963, with the City of Wilmington, the Swedish and Finnish Embassies, and other groups in observing the 325th anniversary of this settlement.

All of our efforts, however, have not been in the historical field. Because of the very crowded condition of records storage in public offices at all levels we amended our laws to provide for the establishment of records centers; a central microfilm service for all State, county, and municipal agencies; and a broadening of the scope of records acquisition to include those that are inactive.¹⁹ In fulfillment of these provisions we have had in operation for several years two underground records centers in forts declared surplus by the Department of Defense and another in a building formerly occupied by the State Police; some rented storage space has been used for the same purpose. Our microfilm project has made significant strides since we began in 1938 with a Zeiss Ikon camera and stand, exposing 36 frames of film at each loading. At present we produce several million exposures or approximately 25 miles of film each year. This work includes current projects for State, county, and municipal agencies as well as the making of security or insurance copies of records in the courthouses for the counties. As a consequence of the several aspects of this program there are no large record groups in the State or its political subdivisions outside of the jurisdiction of our Commission.

The members of our Commission just appointed in 1905 and

¹⁹ *Delaware Code Annotated*, title 29, chapter 33, paragraphs 3301, 3309, 3321.

then confronted with Professor Dawson's report of the next year could not have envisioned the future of their efforts except in the hope and expectation that the historically important records would be saved for posterity. Looking ahead now we see a still broader horizon for the many facets of our archival efforts.

Due to increased population and the machine production of records there will be greater accumulations than heretofore with which to cope. Our present techniques of records management and micro-filming will, no doubt, be continued with modifications, but this will not be sufficient. We will need to evaluate and use new automated methods where possible. There will probably be dry processing of microfilm and other developments in this field. The experience we have gained from the use of underground records centers will undoubtedly be utilized for the construction of any new records depositories. We believe the days of the above-ground Hall of Records are numbered.

To compete with rising labor costs and the increasing volume of records to be handled, we foresee some adoptions of assembly-line methods of processing record groups, including automated finding media and accelerated processes for cleaning, fumigating, and repairing. There will surely be the use of closed-circuit TV for supplying reference data more quickly.

There will be the development of systems and methods to curtail other expensive and time-consuming processes now performed manually. Continued development and the refinement of methods for controlling the creation of records will be pursued. There will also be needed wisdom to properly evaluate the extent of feasibility for the application of machine processes and to determine when to retain manual processes.

We will see the use of rapid and less expensive publication methods in combinations of microfilm, offset printing, and similar methods. There will be increasing emphasis on the permanence of records materials, as well as important developments in devising more durable and safer containers for storing records than heretofore.

In our museum and historic sites operations we foresee a greatly increased attendance with a resulting impact on our facilities. There will be greater utilization of our archives for reference and interpretation. We may cope with the increased public use through more interpretation, additional literature, recorded docentry, and electronic devices. An expansion of staff, increased storage space for growing collections, and traveling exhibits to the schools are in the future.

The acquisition of the Old State House, Dover, built between 1787 and 1792, and other historic sites is part of our historic preservation plans. We also plan to strengthen our archeological efforts by employing professional staff members. These plans will all broaden our horizon.

The formation of the Society of American Archivists was similar to that of our Commission. The historians took an active part in it and were our first leaders. The Society was founded in 1936 at Providence, Rhode Island, with a total membership of 128. At the present time we are an organization of 1,378 members and subscribers in all States and many foreign countries. The activities of the American Historical Association in the early years of this century are reminiscent of the present "Study of State Archival Programs" under the direction of Dr. Ernst Posner. Many of you know that with a grant from the Council on Library Resources our Society was enabled to undertake this definitive study. Dr. Posner has completed surveying all of the 50 States and Puerto Rico. The results are being edited for publication and we all are awaiting the printed volume. Like the earlier reports of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, it will be an invaluable reference volume and it is hoped that it will exert an equally important influence in improving existing State archival agencies and in establishing new ones where none now exist.

Our Society has a broad committee structure working in a diversity of fields related to archives and records management. This has been implemented, ably coordinated, and made functional by the untiring efforts of Dolores C. Renze, the Society's elected secretary for the past seven years. Recent presidents of our Society have been able to formalize and improve many of our procedures, methods, and corporate structure with her splendid advice and assistance. Recruitment of members, improved billing and mailing methods, a personnel placement service, a published annual *Directory*, and bringing together and organizing the Society's archives—these are reminders of her contributions and unselfish service for the improvement of this Society.

Since 1956 there has been increased and broader participation by our Society in academic proceedings and in international roundtables and congresses. Also, there is greater activity by members in meetings of related organizations with interests closely allied to those of archivists and records managers. These include the American Association for State and Local History, American Documentation Institute, American Historical Association, American

Library Association, Association of Records Executives and Administrators, American Records Management Association, National Microfilm Association, and Special Libraries Association; one should mention also the Society's own affiliation with the Council of National Library Associations.

The reports of our treasurer show a good operating balance, interest-bearing reserve funds in separate accounts, a fully implemented Life Member Fund contributing to the operating expenses, and various special Project Fund accounts established for educational purposes. A healthy fiscal condition prevails.

Through the years there has been steady development and growth of our principal publication, the *American Archivist*. From a small publication of 50 pages in 1938, it has increased in content and size to its present 119 pages. During these years also it has earned a position in the forefront of archival journals. In many instances it is our only published means of professional communication with members in distant places. As a founder member, I have indeed been gratified to have witnessed its continual growth under a series of editors who willingly gave of their time to produce it.

Now let us look ahead for our Society. In the foreseeable future our membership can reach two thousand or more. At the present time your officers and Council are handling a greater workload than is feasible on a voluntary basis. The alternatives are: to obtain funds to establish a paid secretariat with an executive director and staff to perform these administrative duties for us; contain the membership and activities to proportions that can be handled on a voluntary basis; or decentralize into regional groups of manageable size with officers functioning on a voluntary basis. Another alternative might be to seek a subsidy for the *American Archivist* and to develop with a university press a publication program that could become income-producing. If we do not adopt one of these alternatives we should review the duties and services now required of the secretary, who serves on a voluntary basis.

Still looking ahead, there is the need to amend considerably or rewrite our constitution and to adopt bylaws in conformity with present corporate practices in order to qualify as an educational organization with a favorable tax-exemption status. The present limitation of one year on the office of president should be removed as it is too short a term to implement a constructive program.

It is to be hoped that in time our Society will be able to provide more technical services for its members. An agency to test and evaluate new products and equipment would be most helpful. The Li-

brary Technology Project of the American Library Association performs this service for the librarians.

We should see in the future the production of an increasing number of published guides and manuals as the results of the work of our committees. If we are to compete with the increasing accumulation of records being created, we will have to keep abreast of modern records-making methods and adopt those that will best serve our needs.

Undoubtedly, our greatest need for the future is the encouragement of educational and advanced training courses for archivists and records managers. There is also great need for updating or continuing educational opportunities for many archivists already in service, not only at the national level but at regional, State, and local levels as well, including the various specialties.

Present availability of qualified and adequately trained candidates for archival placement is indeed limited and the demand is increasing. We are in competition with schools, universities, libraries, industry, and others for the graduate students coming from our universities. We will have to become more of a profession and exhibit leadership and interest in young people in order to show them the advantages of it.

As the organization representative of the profession, the Society should have a direct interest in the encouragement and sponsorship of sound academic programs which have been or will be established. Compared with 50 years ago, 25 years ago, or even today, the opportunities for service and satisfying employment in our field of endeavor surely offer horizons unlimited.

Marching Home

What is needed now is a clear decision in a precedent-setting court so that the thousands of state and federal manuscripts now at large and destined to be fought over one by one may come home quietly. In order to get such a decision the issue should be joined in friendly fashion and with agreement as to the governmental origin of the record or records in contest. What a great day it would be to see all those estrays now representing Maryland in "Autograph collections up and down the East Coast" come marching home!

—MORRIS L. RADOFF in his letter of transmittal to the Hall of Records Commission of the *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the Hall of Records, State of Maryland*, p. 8 ([Annapolis, 1963]).