

Archival Standards and the Posner Report: Some Reflections on the Historical Society Approach

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ONE OF THE ironies of the history of archives administration in the United States is that the institution most directly concerned with the preservation of historical resources has generally proved to be the least effective archival agency. This irony is compounded in view of the historical society's long and important role as a custodian of State records, generations before the advent of the modern State archival institutions. Throughout much of the 19th century, when public records were consistently neglected by the States, the private and publicly supported historical societies stepped into the breach to gather up many early and important State records. Even today the Archivist at the Idaho Historical Society can write that if it were not for the archival services that his society provides for the State "there would be no possibility of having any state archives at all."¹ Whatever the limitations of the historical society as an archival agency, one thing is clear: New Hampshire, Maryland, Minnesota, Colorado, and other States are deeply indebted to this institution for preserving much of their priceless archival heritage.

Less than two decades ago more States vested their archival responsibility in their State historical societies than in any other type of archival agency, and, according to the 1963 *Directory of State . . . Archivists . . .*, 11 States continue to rely on historical societies for some archival service—a number equaled only by the States that put this responsibility on State libraries.² In view of this statistically impressive situation, I wish it were possible to re-

* The author, State Archivist of Wisconsin, read this paper on Oct. 8, 1964, before the Society of American Archivists at its 28th annual meeting, in Austin, Tex., as a contribution to a session on the development and implementation of standards for State archival agencies. The panelists participating in the session had been provided with advance proofs of the "standards" chapter of Ernst Posner's *American State Archives* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1964).

¹ Merle W. Wells to the author, Sept. 18, 1964.

² Since 1947 the archives in Minnesota, New Mexico, Colorado, and Oklahoma have been transferred from the historical society to some other agency.

port that those archival agencies operating under the aegis of State historical societies had developed standards approaching those set forth by the Society of American Archivists and Dr. Posner in his distinguished report, *American State Archives*. In too many cases this is far from true. Indeed, the Nebraska State Archivist concedes that "the problem here is acute, and we have a long way to go before the archives meets minimum standards"; the Director of the South Dakota Historical Society candidly admits that "what we do here is semi-archival at best and poorly done"; and the Archivist at the Ohio Historical Society confesses that at present he can do little more than conduct a records holding operation in an antiquated firetrap.³

Many of the less populous Western States that have assigned the recordkeeping function to their State historical societies constitute an archivally depressed area. With the exception of the institutions in Kansas, Utah, and Wisconsin, none of the societies has a comprehensive archival program. Montana, the Dakotas, and Missouri have no standard archival programs; in the last State the historical society serves only as custodian for records rescued from the State Capitol fire of 1911. In six of these States there is no full-time archivist responsible solely for the archival program. Compounding the archival dilemma of the historical societies is the fact that six of these States—Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Nevada, Nebraska, and South Dakota—have no active records management programs, and only in Utah is the archival and records work ideally integrated in the historical society.⁴

The archival functions of many of these societies are rudimentary at best. Six agencies serve as little more than *de facto* or legally permissible depositories for public records, both State and local, that are voluntarily sent to the Archives. For example, the Director of the Nevada Historical Society reported: "We get nothing until the departments feel the material is of no further value to them, either in their department or historically." The Idaho Historical Society accepts archives only when they are threat-

³ William F. Schmidt to the author, Sept. 22, 1964; Will G. Robinson to the author, Sept. 14, 1964; interview with Meredith Gilpatrick, Sept. 24, 1964.

⁴ Information in this survey was compiled from "Directory of State and Territorial Archival Agencies," in *American Archivist*, 17:209-219 (July 1954); Mary Givens Bryan, comp., *Comparative Study of State and U.S. Territorial Laws Governing Archives* (1955), *passim*; H. G. Jones, ed., *Directory of State Archival Agencies, 1959* and *Guide to State and Provincial Archival Agencies, 1961*; William T. Alderson, comp., *Directory of State and Provincial Archivists and Records Administrators, 1963*; and Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston, 1962).

ened with destruction, while the archivist of one of the larger societies remarked that the only records held "were given to the Society through the generosity (after much prodding) of the various state and county agencies, and these records are for the most part not as valuable as we would like to have." The archival function in most of these societies has been assigned to the library, and the library—lacking an adequately trained staff and physical facilities properly to assemble, inventory, and house the records—often stores them where they are inaccessible to the State official, the scholar, and the public. The Archivist at the Nebraska society states that their "archival arrangement is wholly inadequate because the records are not cared for and scholars have great difficulty in obtaining records for research."⁵ Only in two or three of the better equipped societies are public records acquired through systematic records disposition programs and properly assembled, organized in record groups, adequately inventoried, and made readily available for administrative use and scholarly research.

Practically all these agencies lack those sophisticated functions that characterize a first-rate archival program. No fumigation chambers or laminators grace the premises of these societies, and, aside from rudimentary cleaning and repairing of documents, there is little or no rehabilitation of records. True, most of the societies have microfilming programs, but except in Utah microfilming is almost exclusively concerned with State newspapers. Those public records put on film are usually microfilmed in some other government agency such as the board of health. None of these societies has an archival publications program to make its services and holdings known, although Utah and Wisconsin have just launched such programs. Neither do any of these institutions have active local records programs, although some have statutory authority to review requests for the disposition of local records.

WEAKNESS OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY APPROACH TO ARCHIVES

Many of the problems of this approach are not of the historical society's own making. Though it may have seemed the pragmatic and logical solution to the public records problem for the legislature to delegate archival responsibilities to the public institution most directly concerned with the preservation of historical resources and the dissemination of State history, it was also the frugal solution. Almost invariably it involved no additional appropriations, no in-

⁵ Clara S. Beatty to the author, Sept. 22, 1964; William F. Schmidt to the author, Sept. 22, 1964.

creased staff, and no expanded facilities. The Idaho society, for example, officially became the State Archives in 1947, but it is still awaiting its first legislative appropriation, the lack of which—the Director reported in a mild understatement—has prevented the development of a consistent archival policy.⁶ Small wonder that many of these societies—already straining their capacities and budget to support existing library, museum, publishing, and manuscript collecting programs—have treated the archives as an interloper or an underprivileged stepchild.

The problem is exacerbated in the case of those societies that are themselves underprivileged, because the archives invariably reflects and magnifies the limitations of the parent institution. Many of the western societies, particularly in the less populous States, can barely provide even the minimum services of a traditional historical society. As one director reported, “. . . a society . . . burdened as we are, with the necessity of preserving what we can garner of current publications, and that as an assumed rather than an official duty . . . cannot do the archival job that ought to be done.”⁷

No wonder that the archives in these societies have been low in prestige and accomplishment, short of staff, cramped for space, and, worst of all, operated on a minuscule budget. Yet neither inadequate finances nor the demands of the society's nonarchival work fully explain this failure, particularly in the case of the larger historical society. Four of the societies under discussion have annual appropriations of more than \$300,000. The problem, of course, is that very little of this money filters down to the archival program. Ohio, for example, with a personnel services appropriation of over \$400,000 in 1960, budgeted about 4 percent (\$16,000) of this amount for the Archives.⁸

The basic problems, I submit, are those of emphasis, of priorities, and of historical values, which in turn are reflected in budget, staff, and facilities and which have relegated the archives within the historical society to the status of Cinderella. Several societies report that their emphasis is on museum and library programs; “. . . archival work is regarded as supplementary to other functions.” The former director of one of the largest societies admit-

⁶ *Twenty-seventh Biennial Report of the Director of the Idaho State Historical Society, 1959-1960*, p. 12 (Boise, 1960). The Historical Societies of Utah from 1917 to 1951 and Ohio from 1927 to 1959 also functioned as the State Archives without any legislative appropriation for records work.

⁷ Will G. Robinson to the author, Sept. 14, 1964.

⁸ Whitehill, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

ted that the archives was the "underprivileged third of our tripartite institution."⁹

The low priority given the archival function is also seen in the director's annual report. Except for reports from Wisconsin, Utah, and Idaho, the directors hardly mention the archives, its programs, or its needs. Small wonder that a past president of the Society of American Archivists should conclude (not altogether inaccurately) after reviewing several of these reports, ". . . in every case where the archives are administered by the State historical society, little attention is given them."¹⁰

Many historical societies have also failed to educate the State and the public on their archival responsibilities. Assuming that the quickest route to enhanced prestige and increased appropriations is through programs in popularized history, they have emphasized such functions as those pertaining to the museum, the school program, and historical sites rather than the archival program. One director frankly admitted that in his opinion "the functions of the society should be limited to selling the public a bill of goods on the value of history." This may be the way to increased appropriations but only because the society has educated the legislators to believe that its most important functions are in the field of popularized history. If the legislature "buys this bill of goods," there is supposed to be more money for every division. In practice, however, this trickle-down theory seldom results in a larger operating budget for archives. Additional money is likely to be absorbed in increased administrative costs and in the expansion of existing programs or the creation of new ones.

ADVANTAGES OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY APPROACH TO ARCHIVES

This paper has stressed certain limitations and inadequacies not to discredit the historical society as an archival agency but rather to point out the major ills and the remedies to be applied if the historical society is to serve as an effective and viable archival agency. Indeed, most of the directors or State archivists I heard from firmly hold that the historical society's advantages, particularly in fostering academic research and strengthening the bonds between the historian-archivist and the historian-teacher, more than offset its limitations. The historical society, bringing together as it does

⁹ Jones, ed., *Directory of State Archival Agencies, 1959*, p. 50; Clifford L. Lord, "The Archival Program of Wisconsin," in *American Archivist*, 12:252 (July 1949).

¹⁰ Morris L. Radoff, "Reports of State Archivists," in *American Archivist*, 17:335 (Oct. 1954).

all the historical resources of the State in one institution, creates an optimum research situation from the scholar's point of view. Particularly is this true of those six societies¹¹ that are situated in the same city with the State's major institution of higher learning and thus are part of a cooperative community of scholarship and research. In this situation the archivist has ready access to the opinions of a diverse group of academic experts in making records appraisals; he should become more aware of the research needs of broad areas of scholarly endeavor; and there will be a high incidence of scholarly research in the archives as compared with their administrative use. An important utilitarian benefit that the State Historical Society of Wisconsin derives from its close association with the university is the service of moderately inexpensive but highly competent part-time student assistants. The Division of Archives and Manuscripts of the Wisconsin society employs about 10 such students, both graduates and undergraduates, who have such duties as routine clerical work, typing, assembling records, and preparing descriptive inventories. It should be noted in comparing the budgets of archives divisions maintained by historical societies with those of other archival agencies that the former are not burdened with routine housekeeping costs, that there are practically no administrative or overhead costs, and that most of their appropriations go for personnel services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The fact that Wisconsin, Utah, and Kansas have well-developed archival programs indicates that the historical society is capable of providing the State with a good records program. There are, however, certain basic prerequisites to making the historical society an effective archival agency:

1. *A Program of Education and Promotion.* Too often the administrative heads of historical societies know little of the scope and nature of a modern archival program and the many publics it must serve. It is the archivist's responsibility to educate the director and his division heads concerning the requirements, functions, and significance of the archival program. The director, in turn, has the responsibility to educate his board of trustees, the legislature, State officials, the society's membership, scholars, and the public on the role of archives. Many of these societies have large memberships that might be mobilized as effective pressure groups for improving the archives programs. The director should also educate these laymen on the importance of the archival program and its role in assuring continuity of government and in protecting individual rights.

¹¹ Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Utah, and Wisconsin.

2. *Upgrading the Archives.* In an article on trends in archival organization, the late Mary Givens Bryan declared it to be "evident from all surveys that the Archives operating under State historical societies tend to be buried unless a separate division is established, as in Colorado and Utah, with its own appropriation for archives and record work."¹² Consequently, it is imperative that the Archives enjoy a position of equality with the historical society's other main functions and divisions. For many societies this will require a thorough reexamination of their programs and priorities. Here again the role of the director is crucial because he largely determines the direction of the society's activities, its emphasis, and its goals. He is the one who interprets the program to the executive and the legislative branches. Above all, as chief budget officer, it is he who cuts the budget pie, thereby raising the archives to a position of equality, maintaining the status quo, or relegating the archives to an even less important place in the historical society's structure. If it is impossible to obtain a separate legislative appropriation for the archives, the director should be willing to assign a larger share of the society's budget to the archival function, even if this means cutting back other programs. Finally, the archivist must have the continued support and encouragement of the director if a viable program is to be established. In short the director must bear major responsibility for the fortunes of the archives program.

3. *The Records Management Lever.* The direct correlation between an active records program and an effective archival program is well known. At least it is clear that the two historical societies with the most highly developed archives are also the two with the best records management programs. For archivally depressed States the implementation of a standard records program may be the key to upgraded archival standards. Not only do many important archival functions depend on a good records program, but it is much easier to persuade the legislature to support an archival program through records management than vice versa. In a revealing report the Director of the Utah society and former State Archivist notes that records management is a phase of the archival program "that can be sold to the budget-makers and legislators whereas the preservation of historical documents or permanent records is too often classified as one of the 'frills' of government that should be eliminated or can wait for some other time."¹³ But historical societies with substandard programs can wait no longer.

A LOOK AHEAD

In many of these agencies the prospects for higher archival standards are dawning if not yet bright. The Nebraska Archivist reports that the new Director has taken a vital interest in the State

¹² Mary Givens Bryan, "Trends of Organization in State Archives," in *American Archivist*, 21: 34 (Jan. 1958). The Colorado archives were amicably transferred from the Historical Society to the newly created Division of Archives and Public Records in 1959.

¹³ Everett L. Cooley, "Archives Past and Future," in *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 29: 50-60 (Jan. 1961).

Archives and its problems and is seeking stronger statutory authority, new space, and increased staff.¹⁴ "I believe that we provide excellent service to the state and to the public," writes the Kansas Archivist, "and that our operations are far more than adequate considering the scope of our collections."¹⁵ Considering the size of the State and the resources of the Society, Idaho is doing a competent job in protecting the State's archival heritage.¹⁶ In Utah, with a new Archivist at work, the prospect of new quarters, an effective records program, and the State's records in better condition than they have ever been, the situation demonstrates that the historical society approach to archives can be effective particularly for the less populous States.¹⁷ Since Dr. Posner visited the Wisconsin society the professional archives staff has been doubled and the publications program for descriptive guides and inventories has been expanded to include archives; the area research centers are proving to be an effective vehicle for local records work; and, with the new addition to the present building, the storage capacity of the Division of Archives and Manuscripts will be increased from the current 25,000 cubic feet to 75,000 cubic feet. But above all else Wisconsin—and several other of these societies, I am sure—is dedicated to the proposition that the historical society as an archival agency can effectively provide for the administrative needs of the government, enrich the community of historical research, and in general provide a most satisfying approach to State archives.

¹⁴ William F. Schmidt to the author, Sept. 22, 1964. See also John B. White, "Nebraska—The Records Management Prospect," in *American Archivist*, 26: 365-369 (July 1963).

¹⁵ Robert W. Richmond to the author, Sept. 14, 1964. See also Richmond, "Kansas—The Administration of the Public Records," in *American Archivist*, 26: 333-337 (July 1963).

¹⁶ *Twenty-eighth Biennial Report of the Director of the Idaho State Historical Society, 1961-1962*, p. 12-13 (Boise, 1962).

¹⁷ J. Grant Iverson, "President's Report for the Fiscal Year 1962-1963," in *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 31: 345 (Fall 1963).

Surfeit

A dozen years before John Ruskin's death in 1900 Charles Eliot Norton urged friends of the family to "make a holocaust" of Ruskin's correspondence. Enough, he thought, was already known about the writer.

—VAN AKIN BURD, reviewing John Lewis Bradley, ed., *The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 7, 1965, p. 36.

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