

Preserving Church Historical Resources

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IT has been difficult for me to pull together everything I should like to say and to sift and condense it into a short paper. I shall attempt, however, to answer two basic questions: (1) what are the current provisions for the preservation of church historical resources? and (2) what are some of the areas that should receive particular attention in the future?

One of Abraham Lincoln's favorite anecdotes shows that some prodding and pushing are occasionally necessary. The story is told that Lincoln passed by a field where a farmer was trying to plow with a very decrepit old horse, its bones loosely held together by wrinkled skin. On the flank of the horse sat a big fly. Lincoln was about to brush it off when the farmer stopped him. "Don't you bother that fly, Abe. If it weren't for that horsefly this danged old horse wouldn't move an inch."

My task then will be to look at the "horse" and the "horsefly" to see how we may transform present provisions for church historical preservation into a system that will result in more serviceable and exhaustive collections.

Without going into too great detail one may safely say that there are in North America over 500 depositories of church historical materials. This indicates that there have been lively concern and interest on the part of the various denominations in providing for the preservation of records. Of course, there are so many and such varied types of these depositories that it is almost impossible to classify them. In the 1963 *Directory of Religious Archival and Historical Depositories in America*, 486 depositories are listed. The Roman Catholic Church has the greatest number with 162

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individual depositories; the Episcopalians follow with 83; the Lutherans stand third with 80; the Methodists have 23; the Friends have 21; all Baptists have 19; there are 12 Jewish depositories, 11 Presbyterian, 11 United Church of Christ, and 8 Unitarian and Universalist combined. Of course, there are also many denominations that have five depositories or fewer. In addition an impressive number of theological seminaries have in their collections considerable church historical material apart from archival or manuscript materials.

Among some denominations the regional, diocesan, or district archives are usual. This accounts for the large number of Roman Catholic depositories, for example. The Episcopalians function under a centralized archives with diocesan "historiographers"—about 73 in all. Lutheranism—today divided into approximately three equal parts—also operates with regional district or synodical archives, 64 in number.

Weakness in communication or public relations has become apparent with respect to most of the depositories for religious resources. Unfortunately one may only speculate about the causes and perhaps should beware of generalizations. At any rate, the Society's Committee on Church Archives received only a few more than 100 replies to the 486 questionnaires it sent out. My guess would be that we have obtained information from the hundred most significant and active depositories, and in this case the conclusions drawn from our present information must be at best tentative.

Many of the depositories seem to consider their financial resources as highly classified information. Others, parts of larger operations, found it difficult to report their finances realistically. Of the 35 agencies reporting, the median annual budget is \$10,000 and the average is somewhere between \$16,000 and \$19,000. The lowest reported figure was \$100 and the highest \$80,000. There is no apparent correlation between financial expenditures and services and facilities. Institutions with affluent budgets frequently offer no more service than smaller ones, nor are their facilities more de luxe.

Almost all agencies undertake research for inquirers but are reluctant to do genealogical research without payment. More than half of those reporting provide photocopy services, but only a third prepare and maintain exhibits and engage in publication programs. A tenth are working with oral history projects and less than a tenth maintain historic buildings.

Research and reference facilities are provided as a *sine qua non*; each agency also naturally has the necessary stack and archives fa-

cilities. A third have museum facilities, their own office quarters, and conference rooms. Slightly more than a fourth have their own kitchen and facilities for social activities or ready access to them. Auditorium space is available to a fifth of the agencies reporting.

Some depositories traditionally have been associated with theological seminary libraries whereas others trace their beginnings to semi-independent historical societies that gradually received certain official responsibilities. All of this leads to great variation among the denominational provisions for archival and historical depositories. One would have to look long for consistency and uniformity of pattern or type.

It cannot be denied that the work of religious archival and historical depositories is still very much in its infancy—even though some historical societies, such as that of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, have celebrated their centennials. Denominational attitudes have further shaped the role and function of their depositories. Churches and religious organizations with strong emphasis upon their background, tradition, heritage, and theology have frequently done more than others. Some depositories apparently are not yet conscious themselves of their own role and function.

According to several reports and our survey far too many church historical and archival depositories still operate with almost every imaginable sort of limitation. Funds, facilities, and staff apparently are kept to a bare minimum. Resources available for historical research seem to comprise their most notable assets. This is not to say that the major denominations, at least, have insufficient concern for the proper preservation of their records. Many of them have developed some rather far-reaching policies for automatic transfer. This obviously is a decided advantage. Far too many bog down, however, because of inadequate support. As long as archival work remains a side issue, not much can be expected.

By and large the major religious historical depositories follow a pattern of collecting and preserving those resources that pertain to their history—usually quite broadly interpreted. The collections of a depository are not completely archival, in the strictest sense; they include much historical material—both manuscripts and mimeographed, photocopied, and printed literature. Periodicals, photographs, and in a few cases even museum objects bearing on some phase of the history and theology of the parent organization are included. Undoubtedly this seems satisfactory under present circumstances. Anything less will find the researcher frustrated and stymied.

A good omen for the future is the recent practice of a conscious separation of the theological seminary library collection from the denominational historical depository. Experience indicates that in view of the voluminous increase of theological literature and of religious archives, coupled with the rapid progress in technological methods and procedures, it is hardly possible to perform competently in both areas with a nonprofessional staff. Naturally these comments are not directed to separate depositories that may happen to be housed under the same roof. I am here speaking primarily of the archives as a stepchild in a large and useful library.

Outstanding and impressive buildings have been constructed by some historical depositories under denominational supervision, but others are still attempting to operate in a small basement room of the headquarters building. The old question of which came first—the chicken or the egg—is involved when one is addressing himself to buildings, equipment, facilities, staff, and services. Where collections are extremely limited, is this because of limited buildings and facilities? Or are buildings and facilities circumscribed because the collections are limited? Of course, this question is not easy to answer, and one may only speculate. Are some of the collections small because the denomination is numerically small? Are the financial appropriations for such collections small because the collections and services are limited? All these are questions that only the individual denomination and its depository can answer with reasonable certainty.

It is, however, our considered opinion that archivists of denominational archival and historical depositories need to do an immense amount of self-study, introspection, and realistic self-evaluation in order to insure that their work may proceed on the proper criteria of importance, usefulness, service, and accessibility. This is not to say that these religious archival depositories can be ignored by the general or church historian. Nothing could be further from the truth. The collections that many of them have in their care are intensely significant, invaluable, and irreplaceable—even though somewhat scattered, disorganized, inaccessible, and inefficiently maintained.

Unless a devastating cataclysm should suddenly end all historical and archival work in America, the future for church archival and historical depositories looks promising and rosy. Religious depositories have made some significant and tremendous strides forward within the recent past. To no little degree, I venture to guess, the Church Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists

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has been responsible for this progress. Perhaps nothing is more significant to these 500 depositories of religious historical resources than the workshop on church archives at the Society's annual meeting. It would be of the greatest benefit to all who work in such depositories, whether on a full- or part-time basis, to participate in this workshop annually. It is in this respect that the Church Archives Committee of the Society must come forward with a strong program of leadership and guidance, fostering the necessary interest and attracting the workers. The need emphatically exists for continued conferences; for more workshops; for training schools; and for more effective exchanges of information on buildings, facilities, techniques, and methods. The need, however, is not for the establishment of additional agencies, societies, or associations but rather for a closer integration with the work of the Church Archives Committee.

Within the denomination or communion, conferences or workshops of area or congregational archivists are also needed, to give them stimulation and training in methods and techniques. Several church groups are already conducting such conferences annually or biennially.

This leads us to a second point to be emphasized. The average scholar who seeks historical or archival resources, or even information about them, must engage in considerable correspondence (in spite of the issuance of the recent *Directory*) to ascertain precisely where he can find the resources he is seeking. Only a few denominations in America have established primary denominational collections that include the basic resources pertaining to the entire denominational family. The need thus exists for the establishment, for each denomination, of one all-embracing depository and supporting regional depositories. Anything purely local in nature would belong in the latter, whereas the broad or comprehensive materials would belong in the national depository. But adequate rapport and communication must be provided before such a system can function properly. Under this scheme the various organizations within the denomination would be required to designate depositories of both general and local collecting responsibilities. This would at least tend to overcome duplication (where this is undesirable), to define the scope of the collections, and to aid scholars in getting at the most fruitful and productive resources as rapidly as possible. The amount of time spent in "tracking down" resources has blasted the enthusiasm of many a budding historian.

This brings us to the development of a project long on the agenda

of the Committee on Church Archives: the production of a guide to religious historical depositories. Initial steps in producing such a guide are now underway. It will contain, we hope, references to the contents and descriptions of the resources of the various depositories, both large and small. Such a description must define purposes and objectives, and it must indicate the scope of the collections. It would be most helpful if it included a description of the types of services and acquisition methods, and if it gave references to nonarchival functions. Information about the government and polity of the religious organizations would be equally helpful, particularly in identifying the location of specific kinds of records.

This project is indeed ideal. Why cannot it be implemented immediately? For the simple reason that it is virtually impossible to receive this type of information from the depositories through questionnaires and correspondence. The number of "dragging feet" is far too large. Perhaps the ultimate solution to this problem will be a tour of inspection of every depository listed in the *Directory*, similar to Dr. Posner's study of State archival programs. Why is it so difficult to gather information on these depositories through a simple questionnaire? We might speculate. Is the archival or historical operation so limited and prescribed that modesty compels it to remain silent? Do those in charge spend their waking hours on other projects in classroom or library so that they do not have sufficient time to devote to their collections? Is there such abject lack of interest that a reply seems like an intrusion on their proud privacy? Is their collection completely negligible? Is their spirit of service so blunted or their pride of ownership so great that they do not want to share? Who knows the answers to these questions!

Intimately associated with the foregoing needs is an additional one—the preparation of a set of criteria and self-study techniques seeking to standardize or improve existing collections and services. Perhaps this is a matter to which the Church Archives Committee ought to address itself in the near future. What are the standards of evaluating the adequacy of a religious archival and historical depository? Among these norms and standards should be included:

1. Definitions of the scope of the collection, including nonofficial and personal papers, its relation to other denominational resources, and its legal status or authority in the denomination.
2. Adequate facilities for housing, equipment, and services.
3. A well-defined acquisition program, including works from denominational publishing houses, administrative files and records, unofficial publications and periodicals, and a host of other resources related to the denomination.

4. Sufficient financing, including denominational subsidies and budgetary provisions for such essentials as buildings, staff (including part-time workers), training, acquisition, and photoduplication. In many instances it seems that staff becomes one of the expendable items of the budget.

5. Forms, functions, and procedures for accessioning, filing, housing, manuscript handling, identification, rehabilitation, indexing, cataloging, museum registration, exhibits, and publications.

6. Continual self-analysis of publicity and promotional functions, research grants, fellowships, and methods of collecting.

7. Liaison with denominational records management programs. This is increasingly necessary. One of two evils may exist: the one ending in a flood of paper and the other in a dried-up streambed.

8. Control, arrangement, maintenance of resources and materials, and reference services. Many more guides and inventories need to be produced, and these on a more uniform and standard basis.

Not all these projects, however, can materialize unless and until the scope of the collection has been adequately and somewhat consistently defined. As soon as some overlapping and duplication of effort is removed, these recommendations can be implemented.

Moreover, we must define precisely what we consider religious archival or historical material above the congregational or local level. This suggests cooperation among church archives nationally and regionally. With a few notable exceptions woefully little has been done in this area.

One area that requires considerable exploration is the "division of labor" between our committee and the Special Committee on Church Records of the American Theological Library Association. In fact, one wonders if it might not be desirable to make provision for frequent joint meetings of the two committees. The committee of the ATLA is planning to prepare an inventory of records concerning church history in America. Any sharp division between guides and inventories dealing with manuscript material and those dealing with general historical resources seems far too arbitrary. But uniform coverage might be impossible without proper liaison.

Much greater coordination among the depositories will be most helpful in making these historical collections more readily accessible. Areas in which cooperation is sorely needed are:

1. *Producing inventories and guides to the collections themselves.*

2. *Engaging in cooperative ventures and projects and participating in those already existing.* One needs to think here only of the gigantic manuscript inventory that is currently being compiled by the Library of Congress. Yet denominational depositories have been most unresponsive, with the result that even this painless, and to them inexpensive, measure cannot pinpoint their holdings.

3. *Coordinating and reporting on microfilm and photocopy work.* Any number of agencies have attempted to undertake inventories and provide some form of coordination for photocopied materials. Perhaps the best results may be expected from the newly established American Microform Academy. The Southern Baptist Historical Commission must also be praised for its pioneer work in this area. Of course, the *Guide to Photocopied Historical Materials in the United States and Canada*, compiled by Richard W. Hale, Jr., will long be helpful. It is hoped that the American Microform Academy will be able to fulfill its very responsible role of keeping a record of everything that has been reproduced photographically in North America. But, again, this demands the cooperation of all depositories; and, unless such cooperation is forthcoming, even that ambitious program may fail.

4. *Cooperating on and unifying bibliographical activities and services.* We would include here all cataloging, inventorying, indexing, and preparing finding aids. Why it has been so very difficult for our committee to enlist the help of all the members in continuing the bibliography of church records remains a mystery. The project is designed to accumulate data on books, articles, pamphlets, and materials describing church and religious archives and depositories, their resources and procedures, services and functions, and acquisition and processing methods.

5. *Exchanging ideas, data, and information through the "Church Archives" news notes in the American Archivist.* We should encourage all the agencies functioning in this area to respond readily to our inquiries.

Preoccupied procrastination can be the besetting sin of the church archives program.

"Why, Doctor," an elderly woman screamed as she burst into the doctor's office, "You probably don't remember me—but 10 years ago when I came here, you told me to go home to bed and stay there until you called me. But you never did!"

"Didn't I?" asked the doctor. "Well, then, what are you doing out of bed?"

It is about time that the doctor should take a good hard look at our situation and that all of us, as keepers of archival-historical collections, should get out of bed and start screaming. The future of our church historical depositories depends on us.

Privacy

. . . Many things are made offensive in the handling, that are tolerable enough in their own nature: or lie on an odious circumstance, where the substance itself might be more gracious. Letters may be privately written, that would not be publicly divulged . . .

—GABRIEL HARVEY, *Four Letters, and certain Sonnets: Especially touching Robert Greene, and other parties, by him abused*, p. 29 (London, John Lane, 1923; reprinted from the 1592 text in the British Museum).