

The Role of the Secular Institution in Collecting Church Records

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Michigan Historical Collections

MY TASK is to speak of the role of the secular institution in the collection and preservation of church records. I should like to discuss first a case history of the collection of church records by a secular institution, the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan; second, the rationale for such a program in any secular institution; and third, the program's implementation.

The Michigan Historical Collections, which was established in 1935, soon developed two primary functions: the first, to serve as the Archives of the University of Michigan; the second, to collect manuscripts and printed materials relating to Michigan, its people, and its institutions. These two functions are still the basis of the collecting policy, and in carrying out the second function extensive church records have been acquired.¹

It is not surprising that church records became one of the early interests of the Michigan Historical Collections. The founder of the Collections and its director until his retirement in 1960 was Prof. Lewis G. Vander Velde, whose doctoral dissertation at Harvard was a study of the Presbyterian Church in the United States during the Civil War period. This work, published in 1932 as volume 33 of the *Harvard Historical Studies*,² ranks as the definitive work on that subject and is a classic example of church history.

Many of us who collect historical manuscripts and records project our own research interests and specialties into our collecting programs. This is quite natural and usually advantageous, for special knowledge allows us to know what kinds of records are most important and how to seek them out. This was true of Professor

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¹ See Robert M. Warner, *The Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan* (Michigan Historical Collections Bulletin no. 13; Ann Arbor, 1964).

² *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 1861-1869* (Cambridge, 1932).

Vander Velde's work although I should add that he did not neglect other important areas of Michigan history.

At the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in 1939 Professor Vander Velde clearly outlined his interest in church records and the beginning of Michigan's program to collect them. His remarks, later published in the *American Archivist*,³ reported that the recently retired executive secretary of the Synod of Michigan of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. had agreed to persuade the larger Presbyterian units and some individual congregations to deposit their records in the Historical Collections. In return the Historical Collections provided the secretary with working space and assistance in writing his history of the Presbyterian Church in Michigan.

This initial deposit of church records was most impressive; even today it ranks as one of our best collections. This first acquisition consisted of the minutes of the Synod of Michigan and all the presbyteries in the State (52 manuscript volumes) and the records of a number of individual congregations. The earliest record was dated 1824 and the latest 1931.

In his 1939 report Dr. Vander Velde expressed this hope: "The example of the Presbyterians will, we trust, be followed by other denominations." His hope was not to go unrealized, for other denominational records have in subsequent years come to the Historical Collections and such records continue to be deposited.

The Historical Collections serves as a semiofficial depository of Presbyterian Church records in the State of Michigan. When the Presbyterians, U.S.A., merged in the late 1950's with the United Presbyterian Church of North America, those records of the latter body that pertained to Michigan were transferred to the Collections from the denominational seminary in Pittsburgh.

In recent years we have become the official depository for the records of the Diocese of Michigan of the Protestant Episcopal Church and for the Michigan Conference of the Disciples of Christ. The statewide records of the Free Will Baptists and the Wesleyan Methodists have also been deposited, as have numerous records of individual congregations of many Protestant denominations. The church collection today consists of 19 feet of unbound records and 858 bound volumes, dating from 1817 to the present. Perhaps two-thirds of these records are minute books of statewide governing bodies, smaller intrastate governing bodies, and governing boards of local congregations. Other records include treasurers' reports

³ "Local Records," in *American Archivist*, 3:251-260 (Oct. 1940).

and financial data, baptismal and membership rolls, and records of women's organizations and young people's societies. For the most part these materials represent the policymaking records of the church units represented.

A collection of particular historical importance is the correspondence of the American Home Missionary Society. The Collections does not possess the originals of these materials but has microfilm of the extensive files of correspondence covering Michigan, from 1825 to 1846. These six rolls of film contain letters from missionaries and preachers describing, often in considerable detail, their activities on the Michigan frontier.

The Collections has also been interested in collecting personal papers of individual church leaders, and several collections of such papers have been deposited. These include, for example, 18 feet of papers (1835-1900) of the Reverend Ransom Dunn, pioneer Free Will Baptist clergyman, whose papers reflect the transformation of his church from an unorganized sect with untrained clergymen to an organized denomination. They also mention his antislavery interests and cover his presidency of Hillsdale College. The Dunn papers consist of extensive correspondence files, some sermons, sermon notes and diaries, and family papers.

I do not want to give the impression that in collecting church materials we have confined our interests to manuscript items only. This is far from the case, for besides seeking out manuscript records concerning the development of various churches in the State we have built up also an extensive collection of published materials. These published proceedings, reports, and histories supplement our manuscript records and include coverage of denominations for which we have few manuscript materials. The complete proceedings of the annual conference of the Methodist Church in Michigan and the Michigan Baptist Association, for example, fall into this class.

Though they may not be church records, properly speaking, reform journals with ecclesiastical connections and backing have an important place in our collecting program. These range from numerous temperance publications to the controversial periodical *Social Justice*, published by Father Coughlin in the 1930's.

Now let us examine the rationale for collecting church records. The interest of secular institutions in church records is fairly recent;⁴ it is largely a 20th-century phenomenon, paralleling the grow-

⁴ Henry F. May in his article "The Recovery of American Religious History," in *American Historical Review*, 70: 79-92 (Oct. 1964), perceptively summarizes the historiographical trends and growing importance of American religious history.

ing interest in church history by professional historians. As professional historians began seriously to consider church history as a productive area for scholarly investigation, so too did manuscript-collecting agencies. One of the first, if not the first, doctoral dissertations on American church history was written at Harvard in 1902 by Arthur Lyon Cross: *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies*. Cross was later a longtime member of the University of Michigan's history department. According to William Warren Sweet, interest in church history in the graduate schools of American universities increased tremendously after 1920. His own students at the University of Chicago alone produced some 40 of these dissertations, beginning in 1916.⁵ This burgeoning interest in church history closely parallels another trend in American historiography: the development and rapid growth of American intellectual history, the history of ideas. Out of this new historical specialty have come such important works as Vernon L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, Merle E. Curti's *The Growth of American Thought*, Ralph H. Gabriel's *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, Perry Miller's *The New England Mind*, and Henry S. Commager's *The American Mind*. All these scholars have considered the role of religion in shaping American civilization. May's *End of American Innocence* and Goldman's *Rendezvous With Destiny* cover the role of the church in the reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, for example, no historian making a comprehensive study of the Progressive era would omit a discussion of the social gospel movement. This era in Michigan has been a special research interest of my own, and I have found myself in recent weeks poring over minutes of the Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Congregational, and other religious bodies for insight into Progressivism in my State.

It is clear that for any institution attempting a comprehensive coverage of the history of the Nation, a region, a State, or smaller subdivisions will find it essential to include materials on the religious life of these areas. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which reflects collecting trends and interests as truly as any American manuscript and archival agency, has included church records in its library for a number of years. In 1960 this society was designated the official depository for the records of the Baptist and Methodist churches in Wisconsin. The Connecticut State Library, the Alabama State Department of Archives and History, and the historical societies of South Carolina, Minnesota, Massachusetts,

⁵ "Church Archives in the United States," in *American Archivist*, 14: 326 (Oct. 1951).

and Pennsylvania are other examples of secular institutions that have substantial collections of church records. Other church records can be found in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, the Duke University Manuscript Collection, and our own collection at the University of Michigan.⁶

Now let us turn to the consideration of our third and last point: the implementation of a secular institution's policy in collecting church records. In the Michigan Historical Collections and in most other secular institutions the collection of church records is but one phase of a general program of manuscript solicitation. Our success, if we may call it that, is based on no special formula or program designed specifically to collect church records or any particular inducement to attract these records. It reflects the effective application of the principles involved in any good manuscript or archival program: good staff work by imaginative, intelligent, enthusiastic members, both in the field, making contacts, and in the depository, caring for the incoming materials, providing safe and adequate housing for the records, rendering good service to both donors—in this case the various churches—and users, either professional scholars or interested amateurs. No doubt the ideal collecting situation is to have an influential person intimately connected with the particular denomination—such as we have had in the Presbyterian Church—who will survey the extant records of the denomination and actively persuade individual congregations and their governing bodies to place their records in the depository. If such a person is not available, the depository's own staff can by letter and by visit get in touch with church officials. During the past year the Michigan Historical Collections, for example, has been negotiating with the history committees of the two conferences of the Methodist Church of Michigan to bring their records together by transfer to our custody. At present the two separate bodies of material are housed in two different colleges with no professional care and little opportunity for use.

Occasionally, when we have discovered unusually significant church records whose owner or custodian cannot or will not part with them, we have persuaded him to allow these records to be microfilmed. Very few custodians of church records will refuse to allow this. Usually the suggestion is met with enthusiasm and not infrequently with a contribution to finance all or part of the cost.

Church records are transferred to the Michigan Historical Col-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331; Mabel E. Deutrich, "American Church Archives—An Overview," in *American Archivist*, 24: 392 (Oct. 1961).

lections under two different deposit arrangements. The first is outright gift of the records to the Collections; the second is to relinquish them by what we call an indefinite loan. One or the other of these same two arrangements, in fact, applies to all materials we receive. By far the great majority of materials come to the Historical Collections as outright gifts. The principal exception, however, is our church records collection. Most of these records are deposited on indefinite loan. There is good reason for this. In many cases the churches are not legally able to relinquish ownership of their records outside the denomination, or, even if ownership transferal is possible, the procedure for bringing about such action is so complicated as to discourage the effort.

In our institution we have a regulation that materials belonging to us may never be removed from the premises. This rule might work hardship to a congregation that occasionally wishes to withdraw its records for a short time. For example, a church celebrating its centennial may wish to display its original records during a month or two of its celebration. If the record is a loan rather than a gift, its temporary withdrawal can be arranged. As to such a loan arrangement, the question may well be asked: After the library has spent a considerable amount of time cataloging, arranging, and shelving these papers, what if they are permanently withdrawn? This is a valid point, for the risk always exists. As a practical problem, however, we have found that it is not serious. In the 30-year history of the Historical Collections, not a single collection has been permanently removed.

The actual form of our loan instrument is very simple indeed. It is a one-page printed document stating what organization retains ownership of the records and who from the organization is authorized to recall them. It states that the depositor agrees to open the records for general research under the regular rules of the Historical Collections. The agreement, which is signed by the depositor and a representative of the Collections, is accompanied by a brief description of the records deposited.

Does this program of collecting church records for the University of Michigan arouse animosity in the various religious denominations in the State? The answer is no. There has not been the slightest friction. The reason for this lack of conflict is easy to discover: in our State most of the denominations have made no effort to collect their own records and are only too glad to have the university perform this service. For our part, if the denomination does have its own professional archival service, we have been

very willing to cooperate rather than compete with it. For example, the Christian Reformed Church is in the process of establishing a professional archival agency at Calvin College, its denominational school in Grand Rapids. We have supplied the agency with microfilms of certain manuscripts that fit into its collection and have advised on setting up the program. In fact, the person primarily charged with organizing the program is an advanced graduate student at the University of Michigan who has held a 2-year research assistantship in the Michigan Historical Collections.

To sum up, there are of course certain disadvantages in having a secular institution serve as a depository for church records. A secular institution probably will not have the detailed familiarity with the church, its organization, and its personnel that a denominational archives would. The church collection will receive only a share of staff time and interest rather than the undivided attention that it might receive in a denominational archives. Interest, too, may wax and wane as staff changes are made. A secular institution might want to take in only a selective sampling of various records of congregations rather than a comprehensive file of all extant records. In other words, the secular institution probably will be much more selective of the records it wishes to retain than a denominational archives.

Advantages, however, are very strong indeed if the secular archival agency is statewide in scope and is large and affluent enough to provide skilled staff and adequate fireproof quarters. Care, staff, and buildings take money—quite a bit of money—and most statewide organizations of churches are not willing to spend the money necessary to acquire a trained archival staff and to provide fireproof stack and reading-room facilities. If such services are provided to them without charge by a State agency, so much the better.

On a national scale several denominations do maintain a professional archives with competent staffs and adequate quarters. Then, however, the problem of distance arises; many congregations and dioceses and bodies organized by State or region are unwilling to have their records far away in a national headquarters. Most denominations are organized along State lines, and it is quite natural for them to wish to keep their records within the State, where they can easily be consulted in person and where research requests can be handled speedily by telephone or mail.

Records placed in a State or regional collection of a State institution will have their use broadened considerably. They will be listed in, and thus will be widely publicized by, the guides that vari-

ous depositories publish—as has already been done by the historical societies of Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Michigan Historical Collections. Graduate students, scholars, and others who would not take the trouble to visit a small denominational archives will be attracted by the accessibility of church records representing a number of different denominations and conveniently situated in a major research center.

The secular institution provides nearly all the professional service that a church might require for its records and does so without any cost to the religious body. This is a powerful incentive indeed.

Facts More Central

. . . It is an irony of historical recording that minute documentation of the small affairs of men exists in profusion, while other facts, more central to their history, are often hard to come by. For contemporaries, data concerning outstanding events and persons—the day on which a decisive battle was fought or a crucial election held, the names of commanding generals or of eminent office-holders—are matters of common knowledge, which it would be fatuous to record. There seems little point in writing down what is already known by all.

The memory of man is, however, short, and from the perspective of history the generations pass with breath-taking rapidity. No doubt the good deeds of the fathers, as well as their sins, are visited upon their children; but in either case, without an aid to memory, the children soon forget who their fathers were. In the history of South Carolina government this has been the fate of many of our progenitors. They suffer obscurity in our own day largely because they were so well known in their own.

—CHARLES E. LEE, foreword to Emily Bellinger Reynolds and Joan Reynolds Faunt, comps., *Biographical Directory of the Senate of the State of South Carolina, 1776-1964*, p. v (Columbia, S.C., 1964). Quoted by Dr. Lee's permission.

We Hope Certain Ears Were Attentive

Especially women in public life have an obligation to keep their papers for posterity.

—BARBARA MILLER SOLOMON, in remarks made at Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson's second White House luncheon for "Lady Doers," Feb. 19, 1964, as printed in *Report of the Women's Archives 1964*, p. 14 (Radcliffe College [1965]).

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